each according to its kind

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by chaparral_crown

Summary

Will does the only reasonable thing that someone fresh out of a mental hospital with no support system does - he leaves, and goes on a road trip to the Pacific Northwest.

Season 2 AU.

act 1 - the criminality of anticipating evils

Will is frozen. The front door to the hospital feels like teeth over a mouth. It’s bright outside.

“You got a ride, son?” asks the night nurse. A big name tag flashes on her lanyard - Bernice Waters. She looks nice in her head shot. She’s coming off her shift - looks tired of this place, tired of the people in it. People like Will. She doesn’t want to ask, but she’s the mothering sort. This is the kind of place that lots of grown children need tough mothering.

Will doesn’t have a ride. He's not sure he still has a car.

“No ma’am,” he answers, falling back on his Southern manners.

For a resentful moment, he contemplates if Jack Crawford has planned this, just one awkward meeting after another following his release from Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. (*You’re criminal minded but not yet a criminal. How’s that for some early detection?*) The great brute of a man, looking sad, having the temerity to ask if Abel Gideon’s absence and the reveal of Miriam Lass is a satisfying end to the saga. Good old Jack Crawford, with the end of the case in his sights like a train light in a tunnel heading towards him.

On the other hand, Frederick is coming around - Will doesn’t think the idiot credits Hannibal enough for his devastating ability to get blood from a stone. Will’s not convinced he’s done enough to help to protect Chilton from it. In the same breath, Will can also admit he’s not sure if he wants to.

He’s resentful that his feelings on this fake finale have been ignored. Doesn’t everyone already know? Will Graham beats himself against the wall of his perception for these kinds of observations. Seems like someone ought to be paying attention, other than the antagonist. By all rights this is just the beginning of Act Three of a long play - Will just got a rare opportunity to read the tragedy ahead of the class. Somebody handed him a mask for the villain, and didn’t give him the right lines to read. He looks foolish in front of everyone.

It makes him tired to think about it. Thinking about Hannibal and Abigail is tiring. Thinking about arterial spray reports, aspirin and an ear in the sink, cold low-lit rooms in the hospital basement. But it *is* bright outside - maybe this will wake him up.

"I can get a cab," he finally says. "I'm sure the car will be out at the house." He can see the half-hearted protest in the twist of Bernice Waters' mouth but knows he'll be allowed to go. She didn't really want to give him a ride, end of shift or not.

That's fine. This is all fine.

Let's paint a picture, he thinks, opening the door of his home. Here is Will's new reality.

He hauls mail in from the box - it's not as bad as he thought, but there's still mounds and mounds of mail on his dining table, some sorted, some stacked by size and content type. He doesn't have to ask about who does the former and who does the latter. Judging by the date, Hannibal stopped checking his mail shortly after Abel Gideon's disappearance, but also after his experience with Matthew Brown. Will doesn't know how to feel about that.

Will has always lived a feast and famine lifestyle. Between his father's frequent bouts of contract work and alcoholism in his youth, there was always either no money or a glut of it that disappeared quickly. As a teenager, he became sensitive about saving. He siphons money into accounts that will ensure the bills are paid, the lights are on, and there's enough for some food. He can't stop Beau Graham from spending the rest on poorly advised but well meant dinners out, or new fishing poles, or handles of Crown Royal, but he at least ensures that if they need to move, it's not because the rent is overdue.

This carries over into his young adulthood to his grown professional career. Everything that needs to be paid auto-draws from his savings account, which has been tended like a garden rose. Will's austerity is created from a ragged upbringing, and that fear of not having enough and learning to make due doesn't go away. He is lucky that the mortgage, the phone bill, his medical deductibles are as close to hands-free as it gets. No one talks about the slow drag of poverty on the incarcerated.

The majority of the letters are hearing notifications and out of network medical bills. “Of course Chilton doesn’t keep the hospital in a partner network. Of course he doesn’t,” Will snorts to himself, ripping open letter after windowed letter. He’s even more amused to see at least one jury duty summons. Missed that one, he thinks, laughing.

This is another picture to paint - his kitchen is about as stripped bare as it can be, the cleaners for the FBI removing all signs of the crime scene that was his sink, but also all of the consumables and usable cookware. The cookware he suspects are in the brown boxes to the side of the counter island, unusable as evidence. It’s polite of them to have brought them back to the house, he supposes. It smells like Simple Green.

The refrigerator is empty, though a small selection of sauces and condiments are left behind. They are all facing neatly outward. Will thinks he should throw them away before the FBI can try to find another ear in his house. He almost doesn’t look in the freezer where there’s no doubt none of his fish - this is true, but there is a small contingent of tempered glass food dishes full of different meals. Curries, potato pierogis, simple soups, all of them marked with post-it notes and flowing handwritten script.

He throws them all out, almost trips over himself in his haste to do it. What a kind friend Hannibal is, Alana will say. He didn’t need to do that for you, Jack will say. I don’t want him to do anything for me and I never did, says Will and no one will listen. He considers buying Hannibal a gift card to Williams-Sonoma. It wouldn’t do to be rude - maybe a cheeky note of his own about the rubber lids trapping the smell of paneer with fusion chimichurri and “pork” roast?

He does laundry. He folds out the couch bed. He relights the water heater’s pilot flame. He turns on his phone. All of this is familiar, and none of it eases the feeling that this isn’t his house anymore. There’s nothing about it that feels like it belongs to him.

“You have 121 new messages, and 6 saved messages,” chimes the automated voice. Will groans, and deletes them all. He then deletes the text messages without looking at them, taking a particular delight in seeing Hannibal’s name come up from this afternoon, but not read the words. It won’t be anything valuable - maybe a pompous congratulations on his release.

The one person he does text is Alana. ***When you have a minute, I’d like to arrange to get the dogs back***, it reads. ***Thank you for taking care of them - I should have food for them tonight, so if tomorrow works for you, it works for me.***

He wants his dogs, he doesn't want his dogs. He doesn't know if he wants anything.

Getting the dogs back is a brief bandage on his listlessness. Their simple joy at seeing him makes him feel light, snouts and paws warring to be first in his lap. Winston cries a little with anxiety, and Buster can't keep from wagging his tail until he looks primed to fly away. A place for everyone, and everyone in their place.

Alana wants to know if Hannibal is safe, and of course Will says no. Of course he isn't.

When she leaves, he and the dogs all curl up in front of the space heater, and eat dinner from cans. Wet food for the dogs, and chili for Will. It tastes bland, but at least it doesn't have pills in it.

Jack calls - wants to go fishing with an old friend. "I could use some advice from a good angler," he says, both tinny and base on the phoneline.

"Already out fishing," says Will. "Maybe a different time."

The problem with the Mount Vernon neighborhood for Will isn't the old brownstone houses, wealthy homeowners, or even the violent crime that happens near, on, or under the street, depending on which home you come across on the fringes of it. This is Baltimore after all, a city challenged with poverty and wealth chafing against each other daily. Will's problem is much more mundane, relatable for once. It's that there's no goddamn parking.

The unsubtle thing would be to take the open space in front of Hannibal's house. He's parked there plenty in the past, and could do it again. *Hello Hannibal* , his dirty brown Volvo would declare. *We are overdue for a violent falling out that will later be referred to as a domestic dispute with violent escalation. I've ferried a hundred reports on the subject between offices, usually in relation to corpses. We'll see which of you makes use of the trunk tonight.*

Will smiles, but without much amusement. It's not the worst idea he's had. He's contemplated what would have happened if he had called the psychiatrist to pick him up from the hospital, ask him how his wrists were healing up. Maybe he could have grabbed the shiny steering wheel of the car and driven them into a tree, off a bridge, *anything. (Neither of you really should be allowed to live - you, because you are an ugly, twisted thing. Him because he thinks that's wonderful.)* Being straight-forward now feels honest. More honesty than he ever received. Also convenient, seeing as Will's going to have to take off as quickly as possible when the gun gets everyone's attention within a 2 mile radius.

He's still feeling out the gun part. He's not sure if he likes the idea of Hannibal being an unrecognizable smear of a head, but he's practical enough to not risk engaging in a fight to lose. The man has a dangerous tongue, and he must plug his ears. After all, he said it himself - Hannibal's not safe. Of course he isn't.

Will parks around the corner, a block away. Forewarned is forearmed. His coat doesn't quite disguise the handgun as well as he'd like, but he tries to ease into the headspace that makes it feel natural. Instead, he feels obvious, even with no one on the street to see him. This whole thing is just so clumsy. He stays just around the corner, contemplating the empty windows, how they light up when someone is home.

He's been invited over many times, and stayed longer than he should almost as many. For all that Will is certain he's a liar, murderer, cannibal, and adoptive-child-smotherer, he's always felt at home with Hannibal and the big opulent townhouse. They drank Remy Martin after dinner. Discussed nature versus nurture, Atlantis, formation of language in Gaulish Europe, the fall of the Soviet Union, how best to string a piano. Mundane things. Anything that sounded interesting. He'd like to think they both enjoyed it. He's almost certain Hannibal is always enjoying himself, but maybe not for the same reasons.

The Bentley parks smoothly on the side of the house, shiny like obsidian. It's 8:30, and it's been a long day of listening to the mentally deficient and the wealthy unengaged for Doctor Hannibal Lecter. (*Imagine, so much wealth that you are bored with life and troubled by it. You can't even picture it. You're still afraid that mental health care will just complicate your life more, not excuse it - bills, medication, isolate you from your peers. Isn't that exactly what*

happened this time too?) His understanding of Hannibal falls on him like a mantle. It's strangely intimate, tracing the hallways of his thought. When Hannibal himself turns the corner and comes to the front door, wrapped in a warm woolen trench coat over his suit, the moment is surreal.

Hannibal missed the conversations. Hannibal misses having a glass of cognac with him in the evenings. Wants someone to like him for who he is, not what he pretends to be. Why else is Will not a shambling mess in the electric chair, if not for Hannibal's need for company?

Will finds himself unaccountably upset with the unfairness of that. Not quite angry, not quite sad, just hollowed out by it. There's no equanimity there. Hannibal doesn't want Will for who he is, just some version he thinks would be a better adaptation. Will doesn't know how to be anything but what he is. He can't breathe around the injustice of that - how deprived of companionship he feels.

(*You could tell him.*)

The moment passes in the blink of an eye, and Hannibal enters his home. Will cannot account for the weight of the gun in his pocket after all.

(*But you won't.*)

"There's a whale," Will remembers saying, late at night after a Wednesday session. "Can't talk to other whales, no matter how much he seeks them out. He repels them actually," he adds, turning his glass in hand. "Speaks on a different frequency that the other whales find disturbing. The military found him using some old Cold War era mics for submarine detection off the west coast. Named him for his frequency - their version of the content of his character, I guess."

Hannibal is smiling in this memory, but Hannibal is always smiling. It's kind of obnoxious, because sometimes Will perceives Hannibal as the smartest person in the room, making fun of everyone else. It's also obnoxious because it's true - Will doesn't know anyone sharper. He's definitely making fun of him a bit in this moment, but Will isn't nearly as smooth an orator when he's deep in his cups. "It's a bit heavy-handed, Will," says Hannibal, mouth red from biting the alcohol off his lips. It's a strange habit that Will only sees him do when drinking harder alcohols, like pressing his tongue into a sore tooth to see if it hurts. "Suppose

your whale just hasn't run into the right pod yet? The sea is massive and unforgivingly empty for miles and miles, but has its share of oasis."

Will drains the glass. "Reality is that genetics played roulette and the whale lost. Odds aren't good for him. He's already been alone for at least 20 years. The machines can find him because they're looking for strangeness. Everyone else is just bothered by it in passing."

"But you know of him, don't you? Surely that counts for something."

"Honestly? No."

Will can be honest now too. Killing Hannibal won't change anything - the problem is inside Will Graham. (*"I can give you the majesty of your becoming," says Elliott Buddish, and you, awed, sightless, feel your brain catching fire.*) He's surprised to find his eyes stinging with tears with the certainty of it.

The Chesapeake Bay going into Baltimore's downtown is brackish, the foam and rubbish of the urban city ensuring very little is visible. He can remember thinking in years past when he visited for the first time that he saw the smallest of squids, little minnows, coins between jetty rocks. Right now, at 5 in the morning from the pier, it all just looks like dirty water.

Will opens his gas station treasure for the day (*morning? witching hours?*), a plastic-wrapped carton of Marlboros that smell and taste just as he remembers them. He hasn't smoked or wanted to smoke since moving to Virginia, able to put aside the itch when the stress of doing a police beat dissipated. He started smoking to calm himself - listening to people's misery in homicide stained his mind the same way that nicotine stained his teeth.

He learned to make fun of people in the jailhouse asking for a light the second they're released in the morning, stumbling drunks and domestic violence arrests. He hands out a fair share of cigarettes in his days as a detective, one of the few ways he could make connections with witnesses and perpetrators alike. Newly out of prison himself (hospital *, corrects the fictionalized Chilton in your mind, with all his haughty condescension*), Will finds himself

enjoying the first inhale for the first time in years, and the calm that blowing it out after brings. It disappears into the air, already forgotten save the smell.

From the Bond Street Wharf, the Domino Sugar Factory is an unavoidable spot across the harbor, cheerful retro font screaming at him in bright white. It's quirky and happy in a way that doesn't match up with what he's experienced of Baltimore. ***Domino Sugars!*** it yells into the early morning gloom. He wonders how many bodies have been dumped in the water in front of it. That's always his priority, he thinks with a snort - establishing a baseline of how good of a killing ground something is. (*People asked you to be this way. Why get offended now that you are?*) He hopes there's a stupid sign like this over his mangled corpse when work finally catches up to him and someone puts him in the dirt. Maybe Hannibal Lecter is open to commissions by request, consummate artist that he is.

Will likes the large bodies of water, and from all his time trapped on land, he's fairly confident that's where he wants to end up someday. Everything smooths out and opens up, even more than the streams and rivers. You can ignore all the warning signs. The only land is the vessel you ride in on, and the only family the crew and unlanding sea birds. His daddy talks about commercial fishing expeditions like a vacation, like visiting an alien planet. "You gotta watch fer sea monsters 'n gators," says Beau, in a different happier time, tickling a younger Will's foot hanging over the edge of the boat and in the bayou. "Tasty t'ing like you would be jus' a right snack." Will had always wanted to go, but was pushed off to distant relatives and friend's wives that counted on the money from the haul. Daddy said he liked him too much to risk it.

He looks at his phone. He wants to talk to Beau. It's early in Savannah, Georgia, where his father has docked his boat and rented an old shotgun house, so he texts instead. ***Thinking of your crab boats and having a smoke,*** he writes.

He gets about halfway through his cigarette when he feels the vibration from the phone. He half expects an email from work - maybe another fishing request. "Will, I need you," Jack Crawford will say, like Will didn't have to call a cab and put his house back together from a series of evidence boxes. He's surprised to see his father's name rise up when he looks at the lock screen. Beau must be employed right now, something longer term. It's the only time he's good about waking up early.

Sounds like a good morning , it reads. ***You doing ok, boy?***

No, no, and no, but he doesn't want to interrupt. Beau has himself together. Will can let it pass this time - he can tell him later. He always waits to tell him later. Beau doesn't follow newspapers outside of Savannah these days, which made for stilted rare conversations, but is now a mercy. Beau has himself together, and he still thinks Will is fine.

Of course, he writes. ***Don't forget to go into work today. It's a Wednesday morning.***

Don't be bossing me, says the reply. ***I know what I'm about. You don't call me much, have to make sure.***

Will smiles, and leans into the bench behind him, swiping his cigarette into the concrete path. It's practically a novel, as far as texting with his father goes. He reads like a different person - Beau has always had an atrocious southern drawl that Will has all but beaten out of his voice. He changed himself to not sound like a hick - Beau would have told a prospective employer to go fuck themselves instead of change anything. Impoverished, but proud. It's landed them trouble more than help, but Will can respect it now as an adult, where embarrassment of public perception has largely died.

Will needs something to do. In a different universe, he probably would need to go into work today were it not for him being who he is. (*You contemplated shooting your psychiatrist in the head only hours ago. You don't need to go to work - you need to be put down by someone who can make the hard decisions that you won't.*)

He walks to a coffee shop before going back to the Volvo - he doesn't need the energy, but the normalcy of it casts off the feeling of playing hooky, or that he's called out sick from work. (*Is that what you'd call it?*) What he finds is very polished and modern, another one of the concrete and industrial trendy spots that is staffed by young people who make a face when he orders "just coffee". Signs indicate their coffee on drip today is from Ethiopia, and he should get notes of cherry, lime, and brown sugar.

It doesn't taste like anything, and Will finds he doesn't have to fight down disappointment, despite the exorbitant cost. There must be something wrong with him. (*Other than the myriad things you already know about. A collection of neuroses, they called you. What else could possibly be up your sleeve?*)

“Your area expert!” says the flyer, something literally white and red all over, hung from the bulletin board inside the gas station, exclamation points everywhere, tidily photoshopped houses down the side like an Americana film reel. It's ungodly ugly, and catches his eye immediately as he pays for pump 5. The phone number is a glaring use of serif font on poor contrast background. It’s next to ads for injury lawyers, food stamp notes from the convenience store. (*No, they don’t accept them - you wonder at the type of person who lives in wealthy Wolf Trap that would try, but know the exact kind where there’s no alternatives back down south. That quiet desperation* .) “Sell your home for top dollar!”

How do you feel about short sales? he texts in reply, and blinks when the phone almost instantly rings.

He’s a cautious child of an inconstant man, and that makes Will hesitant to do anything too extreme, even when his gut is telling him something else. It has tempered his entire career, kept him from emotional harm but also from making absolute decisions when it might have helped. Signing a listing agreement for his home in Wolf Trap is extreme, but it feels correct. He's dizzy with anxiety - it's a relief to feel something.

“Yes, all of the appliances,” he tells the realtor. “I’m not taking anything with me.”

So then comes the other extreme decision that makes his tongue thick in his mouth. He gently re-homes almost all his dogs over the course of two weeks, making calls to neighbors and people he respects to treat their pets well. He can't keep them if this is his course of action. The farm two parcels over takes the working breeds. Max, Jack, and Harley will do well with the family’s two German Shepherds, and they know the owners and their children. Will shakes hands with the farmers, and strokes each dog’s ears, throat tight. Be good, he tells them, don’t dig much. Try to be useful, even if you are lazy. He bites the tips of Max’s ears, and laughs when he gets a wet nose in his eye for his efforts.

The smaller family members are harder - all of his animals had been troubled before he got them, and while he’s trained them to be respectable creatures, he knows that Zoe’s underbite is a hard one to overcome. Ellie is a sweet thing in her later years, and an older woman in town is connected with Will through a rescue that he has donated to before. Zoe goes with the

rescue owner. She's charmed by the snuffling that her overbite causes, and calls her the prettiest pig she ever did see. Watching her tail wag, jumping into her new keeper's car, Will feels strangely grounded even as he feels another part of him disappear.

By all rights, he shouldn't be upset. He's been away for months, and it's only through Alana that they hadn't been claimed by animal control. He's never thought about wills and estate planning before - he should have ensured their safety long before it got to the point that it did. He's ashamed of Abigail's fate, but mentally can admit that he would be more ashamed had the dogs been put down for his negligence. They don't get any say in their lives.

Where he loses steam is Buster and Winston. The first and the last. Buster is old - a wily thing that will never be entirely tame, and only barely obedient on a good day. He brings Will flashes of joy, watching him chase rabbits in the snow, and bark for dinner. It feels like breaking a promise to take him anywhere other than under his arm.

Winston, by contrast, is polite but fiercely bonded to Will, despite their short acquaintance. Will can't put a hand down next to him without feeling Winston slide underneath his fingers, pushing for contact. He doesn't bring joy so much as comfort. It's nice to be needed, to be herded to bed when they're all tired.

Will doesn't know where he's going next, but it's okay for now. As long as the dogs fit in the car when the house is sold, they can figure it out.

Will becomes proficient at dodging phone calls and visits. Some are well-meaning, and others are rude - mostly Jack's.

"Are you going to finish sulking some day and get back to doing the right thing?" asks Jack in his most recent message. "I would like you to do an interview with Lass - compare notes as it were. Give me a call."

"Will you come by Quantico?" asks Alana. "The administrators are beginning to consider the teaching roster for the spring semester. I think it would be good to let them know if you'd

like to return this coming quarter or take some sabbatical time.”

Hannibal doesn’t call. It feels tactical, so Will in turn doesn’t call either. It still stings to think about the weight of his gun, and the empty night spent in Baltimore. While he plays at omniscience, even Will knows that Hannibal can’t have seen him, or understand why the night had gone differently than what Will had set out for.

He answers nothing except the realtor’s questions, and even then typically by text. A yes, a no, a quick “email me” with documents to sign. When it comes time to take photos of the house, Will takes a few days beforehand to donate the majority of his belongings or send them to the scrapyard. Much like dogs, he has gathered a ragtag collection of rusty parts and projects in the garage, and it takes longer to haul those off than it ever would to clear the half-empty house.

What he does keep are a few small things - some lures that were missed in the FBI’s hunt, too old and brittle at the bottom of an old blue Craftsman toolbox where he keeps needle nose pliers and old fishing reels. A silver coin that his father brings him from the Gulf of Mexico. (“Pirate treasure, son! No dubloons this time, but nex’ one fer sure.”) A pair of porcelain salt shakers shaped like bluebirds that belonged to his mother. Nothing else tugs at him, and he’s strangely at peace watching his possessions disappear into the back of a Salvation Army truck.

Also in the keep pile - glazed tin dog bowls, bought from a camping sale even though he hasn’t camped in years. A small selection of worn down flannels, including one grey and red one that belonged to his granddad. Practical shoes, practical gloves. Rand McNally maps. He’s only happy once everything can fit into the Volvo.

It’s been two weeks since his trip to Baltimore, three since his release from the hospital. Several more since Beverly took him on his advice, and also ignored it. A couple months since his ill fated trial and the stained kitchen floor that is all that’s left of Abigail Hobbes. A few more back since he was introduced to Hannibal Lecter, and a clock started ticking down to this moment.

It's a Wednesday night, and he finds himself in Arlington, idling in the mall looking for a laptop. He had one for classes for ages, but hasn't gone back to Quantico to figure out if it's been released to him again. He thinks that it would have been a waste of the digital forensic team's time - the most insidious thing he had looked up was Georgia Madchen's Cotard Syndrome, intrigued by Hannibal's mentioning of it and unfamiliar with its effects.

Seeing as they thought he had lit her up like a match, he guesses that was enough.

Will has the sensation of leaving, that happy anticipation before a trip. Not quite nervousness, but an anxious need to have everything prepared and in its own place. While a part of him wants to tell the world to pound sand, he understands the practicalities of making sure his affairs are in order.

He contracts out an estate planner to ensure his father and savings are under scrutiny, even as he maintains contact with the funds. He speaks with a criminal defense attorney about wrongful imprisonment suits, practically has them foaming at the mouth to take his case. They are all noticeably less excited when he lets them know he's not particularly interested in suing, but that he is willing to accept a settlement out of court. Jack probably doesn't hear about this part. He can only imagine the voicemail he'd have.

Will is tired of the phone calls. He buys a simple cheap phone with a prepaid plan and a new number, and a reliable and lightweight laptop that the sales clerk is all too excited to tell him about. There's a lot of talk about processing power, and reliable wireless cards. It goes in one ear and out the other, and Will pays cash for the whole thing.

He texts his realtor and the lawyer on retainer. He makes a new email address, and sets up mail aliasing and forwarding. (*You laugh - 52hertzgraham@gmail.com , the loneliest whale and the loneliest email with not a single friend in the contact book. How's that for being a little obvious?*) He might not be paying much attention to his FBI accounts these days, but he's curious what will turn up in it once the realization comes that he's unavailable in person or by phone.

When 7:30 rolls up, he feels the same anxiety he always does - he hasn't cancelled his weekly appointment, and there's a 24-Hour cancellation policy, is there not? There hasn't been anything to indicate that Hannibal has paid any attention to his absences since his release from the hospital, but something makes him think the appointment book is as empty as ever.

He’s halfway convinced he’ll call - having a new number doesn’t mean he doesn’t remember old numbers. It would be so easy.

He texts Beau Graham instead. ***New number, daddy*** , he says. ***Don’t bother with the old one.***

Ok.

And for a moment it *is* ok. He throws the old phone in the garbage after removing the sim card and a micro USB backup of the photos - he can keep pictures of the dogs, even if he can’t keep all of the actual dogs. (*Nevermind backups of old conversations, old hurts. You keep those to remember why you’re here now.*)

act 1 - a good, comfortable road

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In this moment, Will is stepping onto the wooden stairs leading to what is currently his house. He has driven past the cheerful ‘for sale’ sign. ***I’m gorgeous inside!*** , it says, with the realtor’s full title including middle name scrawled across the bottom, cheesy headshot of a late-middle aged man with a greying beard and abundance of jowl.

The clicking of nails from behind the door is easy to pick up in the frigid night. He’s used to a more cacophonous sound, with everybody tripping over themselves to be the first dog out into the yard. With only Winston and Buster, it’s a race to be the first person to see Will. They are insecure in the empty hollows of the house, with only a few fleece blankets and a space heater to keep them company while Will runs errands.

Will is loaded down with several bags - one from the local auto parts store, and filled with spare oil, extra engine belts, tail light bulbs. He has jumper cables and a spare battery. He’s not entirely sure what kind of trouble to prepare for on the open road. Truthfully, he hasn’t driven a long distance by himself in years. He knows it’s not normal to have that much, but Will is also not sure if he’ll be living out of his car before the end of all this. He’s trying to not think too much ahead. He’s not sure if what’s ahead could be worse than what’s behind.

Unseen, before this moment:

Prepping the car has been a work of many days before this. When he initially rolls the car into a hand car wash, the look of dismay on the older gentleman taking car keys for the queue is almost comical.

“Have a few dogs?” he says, wringing his hands. “I hate having to be blunt, but I’m going to have to charge more for this than the typical deep clean.”

Will puts on his least unpleasant face - something between a grimace and a smile. He expects to feel offended, but it just slides off him. “Yeah, I get it.” As long as it gets done.

Will is not embarrassed by the amount of dog hair or mud that builds up in the flooring of it. He's practical minded - he lives in the country, and has a country car. Washing the windows when the road is wet is a waste of time. Worrying about small scratches and how clean the tires are is for people with concerns about how they're perceived. Will has spent the last several months being called everything between a psychopath and a troubled disabled man, never mind the flattering descriptions that follow him up out of the South.

Also unseen before this moment is Will, standing in the aisles of a grocery store in Wolf Trap, contemplating granola bars and picking up prescriptions. The series of anti-inflammatories, immunosuppressants, and migraine medications he is taking is an astounding cocktail of long compound names. Included in his doctor's selection is an anti-psychotic - clozapine.

"You should expect to still have auditory hallucinations," says a well-meaning medical assistant when he goes in for a follow-up. "Auto-immune encephalitis can recur randomly for years, so you should definitely be on the lookout, but while your immune system is healing, you'll probably experience some of the more mild symptoms you experienced."

"I'm not sure what was early," says Will. "I've had irregularity with my sleep cycle and health most of the last few months. What should I expect?"

"Nothing as bad as what you've probably experienced!" she says with a laugh. She has a pretty smile, and a square jaw. Will sees a middle child with a well-meaning heart. No wedding ring, but not quite young either. Medical assistant because a medical doctor would be too hard - an expense, bad hours, too hard. She has ink between her middle and ring finger from balancing a bleeding pen on them. There's a callus at the knuckle from pushing too hard. She's not afraid of him, but he recognizes a compassionate pity he has seen reserved for the abused, the elderly, the homeless. He understands it and hates it anyway. "Nightmares are common, maybe a light fever. Occasional auditory hallucinations. Most of your recovery is dependent on your body convincing itself that parts of your brain aren't cancerous, so keep up with the drugs and give it time."

(*The joke is that parts of your brain* ***are*** *cancerous. Is there a pill for that kind of cancer?*)

"Time heals all wounds," he chirps in reply, scratching at his beard, and feels the pleasure of her smile when she sends him off into the lobby, loaded down with tidy doctor's notes with incomprehensible signatures. He has an absolute hymnal of them.

The mellow blues and greys of the medical office are a change of pace, but the flavor is the same. Up to this point, most of Will's medical treatment has been at the tender mercies of the state department's discretion, with ungentle physicians and practical diagnosis and cost-effective plans. He has had every imaginable drug trial pushed in his face by Frederick Chilton. Now in the office of his GP, with full power of attorney and choice, he hates the idea that this is what he's been rendered down to, the very thing he's been avoiding since the first time a high school adviser recommended therapy - *21 doses of clozapine, 25 mg, take once a day. Take half pill for first week with food. Do not drink alcohol or operate heavy machinery while taking. Do not refill - call doctor for titration prescription renewal and dosage.*

The little white paper bags in the cart seat are glaringly white. With them are two bags of dog food - small breed, senior and large breed, active. A collection of canned nuts, peppered beef jerky, bottled water, and bit of fresh fruit fall in next to the bags. (*"No scurvy aboa'd mah ship," says Beau, handing oranges to you from a plastic mesh bag. It's payday, and a whole bag out of season is beyond your usual means, but they last a while. The tag reads "New Caledonia", with a bright purple thistle next to it, grown in California. You remember things like that - not things like kind words or what your grandparents sound like.*) He wants to stop as little as possible to get started. He'll figure out a better diet to meet his new needs when he can. The dogs at the very least will be fine.

Extra gauze for his first aid kit, rubbing alcohol, a new pack of smokes, all the kind of healing that he might need. To make a point, he buys a bottle of Crown Royal. The cashier gives him an unhappy look, looking at his arm full of those glaring white pharmacy bags, and Will dares him to say something.

In the present, Will dares the dogs to say something. They can't, obviously, but he feels a strangeness in his throat when they nose at his purchases. "I got food for you guys," he says, rubbing Buster's shoulders to keep him from jumping. Winston curls into his temporary nest of blankets, and watches as Will sorts his purchases into plastic black milk crates, filling the car. His eyes are shiny and black as Will passes from front door to kitchen, over and over.

At a quarter before 2 am, Will has the old barn locked, tool shed closed, and keys tucked into a manila envelope that he will put in the drawer next to the kitchen sink for the realtor to find. The cottage floors are empty, closets cleared, detritus of a life only ever half lived here gone.

The trunk of the car is full, mostly made up of the few boxes of necessities and clothes that he needs to be at least somewhat presentable and warm during the winter, and dog food.

Patsy Cline is crooning from a battery-powered radio the size of a VHS tape. The cheap aluminum antennae points towards the kitchen window, and the dogs' leashes are curled up next to it. Other than grabbing his wallet and making sure his new phone's charger and car adapter are ready, there's nothing much left to do. He's already double checked his email forwarding - there's an unofficial potluck in the Drug Enforcement offices this Friday for a retirement, and Lauren in HR wants a headcount. (*"Don't forget to sign the card!" says her closing statement. "It's at my desk with a bag of pens next to it." She signs off with a heart, and you promptly delete it. You won't miss this bullshit.*)

He walks the house. He had been a younger, prouder person when he had bought it. Acres of room to roam, and no one to slide accidentally into his head in the undeveloped wild on the edges of Virginian suburbia. Close enough to work, far enough away to get out from under the constant press of people. After a decade of rental apartments where the other tenants' unhappiness bleeds into his perception, it had been a massive relief.

Looking at curtainless windows and empty open closets now, it has none of the warmth that he felt moving in. *Here's the window I crawled out of to almost fall in the snow* , he thinks. *Here is the shower where the gnarled horror of horns is creeping out of the crown of my head.* The inky watery blackness of his night terrors is somewhere beneath all the shiny grout, wood varnish, primer paint, and pine floor wax. It'll grow out like mold someday, a blush of darkness one day, and a vivid shadow the next. Once it takes root, everything beneath the surface is rotten.

(***What do you see?*** *says the note. "What do you see? "says Jack.*)

(*"I can see why you have bad dreams," says Hannibal.*)

He descends the stairs in haste. Thinks of auditory hallucinations, and how much of the first stage of being sick was just him being whatever it is that Will Graham is. Will's a little nauseated from staying up late, but there's nothing actually wrong with him (*right now*). He'll sleep in the car before he sleeps another night here. Getting an early start will be easier if there's nothing to come back and check on twice.

There's a vague sense of guilt he experiences, waking the dogs again and clipping them into their collars with the new phone number shining on the tags. They shake out their soreness on the bare floor, and follow him out the front door to the car without complaint. Will makes a nest for them in the backseat, a duffel with his overnight essentials, laptop, and a cold weather sleeping bag shunted into the foot well to make a better space to lay out blankets. Winston and Buster will travel in greater comfort than him, and likely still scramble for the front seat by the first couple of miles out.

Once Will settles them, he makes sure everything is off in the house, and locks up. The relief of the door between him and the inside is embarrassing. From the driver's seat when he slides back into the car, a wool blanket for him left ignored on the passenger side, Will stares into the fields, mouth twisting.

(*Do you really need to be here?)*

He clenches the steering wheel, stretches his back. Sighs.

What's really keeping him here? It's cold, and everything that matters fits in the car. His laptop is charged. Toothbrush and change of clothes ready. Crate of a rare few important things in the back trunk, and at least one dog snout brushing up against his arm on the center console. The house is empty, just a husk of the past years with voids for rooms. What's the actual difference between leaving at 2am and leaving at dawn? Is someone really going to ask after breakfast with Will Graham these days? Has he got a report to turn in? (*Lauren in Federal Drug Enforcement HR asked for your signature for some random jerk off's card, you guess* .) Who's really going to miss him if he leaves right this minute?

He turns on the car, turns up the car heater, makes sure that the dogs are settled, and flips the rear view mirror to not shine light in his eyes. He doesn't watch the house disappear as he rolls down the gravel road. There's no image of it that he wants to keep.

I can sleep when I'm dead , reads a coffee mug in the truck stop, steaming on the counter with over-roasted beans from an under-sealed stale bag. It's glazed black with shiny white and red letters. Someone thinks they're being very funny. Someone is a mid-60s white woman manning the counter. With his own coffee in hand, Will toasts her as he pulls up to

the checkout, holding a muffin of some indescribable brown flavor. He suspects Banana Nut, but with the way most of the baked goods looked, perfectly overbaked to homogeneity, it could be pretty much anything. Also in his hand is a small thermos of chicken broth he has brought in to warm.

She raises her mug in turn. “You look like a rough night, baby,” says the cashier, “I hope you aren’t going into work like that.”

“Vacation leave, fortunately. Just making a stop to walk the dogs.”

The skin around her eyes draws together as she smiles, a polite look made kind by age. She takes the morning shifts because she doesn’t sleep much. Judging by the yellowness around her eyelids, she’s sick with something slow and uncomfortable. (*Well that’s just life, of course.*) Ohio is full of people like her, but without the ability to just leave it, so she’s here in this gas station, at 9 in the morning, finishing out the limited rush hour that Sandusky has.

“Long drive?”

“Since the Virginia coast.”

She whistles. “That *is* a rough night. Drink the dark roast stuff,” she adds, pointing to his foam insulated coffee cup. The texture of it is sticky on his fingers. “More caffeine. And probably what’s steaming in your other hand too - you look like you could use some fluids. Hope you have a good trip,” she adds, and winks when she hands back his change. Will thanks her, and tries to wash her insomnia off of himself with the freezing morning air. It has a different taste from his.

From the car, the dogs have their noses pressed against the windshield, watchful, tails slowly wagging as he approaches. He’s glad to see a lady walk by his car and smile at the two of them. They don’t have people problems the way Will has people problems.

Folding his stiff legs from a long haul back into the car, Will gives the two of them plastic bowls with kibble and a splash of the heated chicken broth to enjoy. He takes a bite of the muffin - it’s blueberry, and tastes of nothing.

Sandusky is one of the rare few places that Will can recall fondly as a child, despite the nomadic lifestyle that Beau had cultivated. (*Children are like your dogs - they don't like change, and they crave routine.*) The summers were temperate, the ship slips not very expensive, and there's a park on the water's edge that Will can remember enjoying across from the maritime museum as a middle schooler. It's as good a place as any to let the dogs out to roam, so despite the near freezing temperatures, he parks and clips Winston and Buster into their leashes. They weave between the picnic tables and tiny iron grills. It's a weekday, and for the most part they have the park to themselves.

The shore of Lake Erie is flat and smooth, even as the heatless winter sun is nearing an apex. It's a very different shore than the one his father sails his tattered work trawler on, but a few things stay the same. Cedar Point rises like the City of Oz from the peninsula, something Will hadn't been able to afford to go to as a kid, but could watch from the shoreline glowing in the night. The park pavilion keeps its cheery bubbly lettering. The playground is still as unimpressive as ever, but blocks of concrete rise up for a skate park. New entertainment for new days.

He has good memories here alongside the awkward and unpleasant - Will has to allow for them, he was a burgeoning teenager here, and social ostracization begins to really gain speed at that age. But Beau was good to him for the year they had here, and Will doesn't think it's a bad place to be.

Will's new phone is nothing fancy, but it can send pictures. He takes a quick shot of the pavilion sign. ***Too cold for roasting hot dogs today,*** he texts to Beau and impatiently watches the upload time for the picture.

Returning to the car and driving down the shoreline road of Sandusky's downtown, everything is pleasant and clean, but he cuts around to a backroad where the warehouses and docks load from. There's a particular pier he remembers being here. This side is the dirty industrial alley that he associates with Beau's work. The lake still glints on his right as he drives westward. Buster stands on the center console like a mast, Winston over his shoulder.

A buzz from the car console alerts him to a new message. It almost startles him - he's gotten used to the quiet in the hours since he tossed the old phone. ***Really? Sandusky in the middle of February?*** says Beau. From the numb feeling in his fingers on the steering wheel, Will's not sure he doesn't disagree. There's not much to add, but he feels a strange warmth, knowing that someone knows where he is, if only for a moment.

A sign catches his attention, something with looping wide letters on his right. It's in front of what looks to be renovated warehouses, bright red brick and shiny new glass extending for a few blocks. ***Chesapeake Lofts Condominiums,*** scrawled across in red and navy blue.

Will snorts, but feels his throat tighten. "Associations come quickly," says Hannibal from some other time.

Maybe they haven't gone far enough yet for a break after all. (*Only 8 hours in, and this is already fucking up. You hope it's a matter of distance, and that you're not carrying this foulness with you - every shore polluted from sea to shining sea.*) Will drives on. He'll see how far he can race the sun before it gets dark or he gets too tired.

Will has been to Chicago in the past, and hates it. It's loud, it's dirty, and everyone is too close together on the urban shore of Lake Michigan on the Magnificent Mile. It feels like wading into hot sand. It's also as far as he can justify going without sleep. It's now 8pm, and he is 690 miles from Wolf Trap with nothing but a few awkward interactions with random people and a brief text to his father to prove the day has passed at all.

While he hates the idea of people, he more so wants to have a few more hours with a view of the water, and a stable internet connection. With an aggressive travel schedule over the last year, he can afford to splurge a little using points. He also wants to start his prescriptions without needing to worry about finding food and other conveniences, and the Oak Street Beach will be a treat for his patient companions before they settle in. Will's experience with immuno-suppressants is unpleasant - he's planning for nausea, shaking. It's ironic how the cure is sometimes as unpleasant as the illness.

He's not planning for the clozapine. Will isn't ready to cross that bridge yet.

Dinner is an abbreviated affair, with mediocre barbecue that he brings in styrofoam containers back to the room, riding the elevator with two leashed dogs, a takeout bag, and a business traveler who looks like he's dying to say something smart about it. He shreds pulled pork over more dog kibble, and settles the dogs in the corner of a room. Each has their own blanket, but close enough to touch.

The computer boots up without fanfare, and despite the archaic internet connection speed, he can quickly see it's been an uneventful day. 15 new emails, only three of which are from actual people instead of listservs.

The first - showing requests for the house. It's on the market as of yesterday, and there's several interested parties. Will rolls his eyes. The realtor should know he's not there at this point. He made it explicitly clear that he could show it at midnight for all he cared. He tries to be gracious, and remember it's just polite to ask. It's the kind of social nicety he's never had patience with.

Thanks for the heads up, he writes. ***Anytime is fine. As we discussed, please contact me when you have offers. I'll be traveling for some time, so use your best judgement.***

The second - an email from Jimmy Price. It's hugely surprising, even though he's always had a tidy relationship with him professionally. The death of Beverly Katz should have marked the end of it, but Price has always been resilient to Will's surliness, and quick to revise an opinion in the face of evidence. Will opens it hesitantly, unsure what to expect.

And of course it's about the house. A forward of a forwarded email to the analyst, covered in short sales.

From: jrprice@bsu.fbi.gov

To: wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org

BCC: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

FW: Newest Listings with Zillow

Hey Will, long time no chat. You should call Jack. He's driving us all crazy complaining about mandatory medical leaves of absence. I saw that you filed one, and I personally am a great fan of them, envious even.

I feel like a creep showing you this, but I watch for foreclosures and short sales. I have it on good authority that real estate is my ticket to living in the Bahamas someday. This is your house, isn't it? Are you moving closer to DC or Baltimore? Can't blame you for not wanting to stay there. Can you put in a good word with the real estate agent for me? ;)

Jimmy Price is fishing. Not very hard - Will has never taken him for aggressive or subtle, but it's been three weeks that he's been ignoring the Behavioral Sciences Unit and the academy. He thinks about replying, but maybe later, when he's less tired. Maybe not. He thinks he's read something about clean breaks. For all his sunny disposition, Jimmy Price is a symptom of his disease, just a gentle one.

He takes a bite of his sandwich. The pickles are too warm from sitting in the heat. Either that or the medication makes him feel a bit nauseous.

The third - a law office, not his estate attorney. A Byron Metcalfe, Esquire. Will almost deletes it on principal, but it too is about the house.

From: byronmetcalfe@metcalfelaw.com

To: wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org

BCC: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

FW: Regarding the Wolf Trap Property

Hello Mr. Graham,

I'm reaching out on behalf of a client of mine that has a very strong interest in your house. I've been advised from recent circumstances that it has largely been unoccupied following some personal trouble, and you've engaged in a short sale.

To my understanding, and I wouldn't want to presume, but circumstances like this usually end with a bargain for the buyer at your expense. My client is willing to buy it outright for your asking price - no contingencies, no inspection, sold as-is, just as you've requested. The property would be a buy-and-hold, so no development or disruption to your previous neighbors. Very peaceful. We can save you some trouble with a possible long wait and commission fees, and help you secure your funds through a private escrow or a trust if that's your preference.

If possible, I'd like to schedule a phone call to discuss particulars. What time and number would be best for me to reach out to?

Best regards,

Byron Metcalfe, Esq.

Principal Partner

Following some personal trouble? To his understanding, and he wouldn't want to presume...Will smiles wryly, even as his hind brain engages.

In Biloxi, the children were told to not go near the water-logged ditches and lakes. The edges would have damp and muddy grass that was easy to slide on, but more to the point, there were alligators. Their eyes are like two smooth stones in the water. One kid slides in, maybe a tennis shoe or an arm comes back out.

He forwards it to the agent. This is obviously the kind of thing that makes him worth having a 6 percent cut of his home sale for. The suavity of Byron Metcalfe, Esquire makes him want to brush the forest floor of leaves - there's a trap underneath all of those benefits. There's two smooth eyes in all that murk.

The thing about cross-country travel, is that after a certain number of plains, cornfields, estuaries, you name it, they all become one continuous painting of passing lanes and truck

stops, and sordid American small towns staving off the economic drain of aging with no youth. Will has lived in many of them, and they all have a strange pattern of Sears-Roebuck houses, strip malls, and general stores that sensible level-headed people run, while the unstable, the unemployed, the struggling families, and the old timers pass through their doors.

When he passes into the Dakotas on day three of driving, taking a night in Bismarck, he finds it remarkable that the Missouri River reminds him of New Orleans, a tributary to the Mississippi from hundreds of meandering miles away. The city of Bismarck looks different, but has so much in common to his old home town, but he feels the tug of memory for it all the same. Old grand estates and churches pepper the streets between old cottages with overgrown trees, peeling paint. What it lacks in humidity and history, it makes up for in people aging in place, desperate to see something other than the snaking of the river. If you're not on the golf course, you're in the refineries. If you're not in the country club, you're in the casino.

He's had one night sleeping cheap in Minnesota, and prepares for a second. The tiny motels of the mid-west and great plains don't bother him - it's the kind of thing he's comfortable with. 10 to 20 units that are half empty, vacancy signs, bad pastries in the fluorescent lights of a small, shabby office. His pride is intact. The only thing he has to watch out for is his car. Will doesn't wonder who's the type to steal from him - they are skittering into the cracks all across the nation. Their crime is the petty and desperate kind of normal, desperate people. He prefers their reasonable fear to the twisted halls of serial killers, rapists, sociopaths.

Today, a young man greets him, probably barely out of high school if a day. He has dark hair and a ruddy complexion, and clearly would prefer to be anywhere else. He watches YouTube videos on his phone - a manager, probably a parent or relative shuffles in the background with paperwork and bills. People inherit these jobs. Nobody asks to own a small town motel.

"Just the one night," he says. "I hope dogs are ok."

There's a sound outside the room, and no matter how many times Will pulls the curtains back and sees his Volvo sitting with a couple other cars, nothing else materializes. It sounds like scraping, someone running metal or bone against the gutters of the old eaves of the building.

There's a decorative rod-iron swirled fence between the doors and the parking lot, something cheerfully Disney. It must be something against that.

The room is sparkling tidy, so he doesn't suspect something more dangerous - the walls are clean and unbrowned, so no meth. The mattress and linens are warm and old, but smell of bleach and lavender fabric softener, so no hooking.

So maybe a hallucination, an auditory one.

They told him this could happen. They told him this was normal for auto-immune encephalitis. It persisted in Baltimore State, and he had hoped returning home, finishing the plasmapheresis would be the end of it. Everything else is just residuals from weeks and weeks spent around the unhealthy, absorbing their miasma of psychosis. *Let this just be empathy* , he had thought. *Let this just belong to the schizo-affective woman at the end of the hall. Let this just be borderline personality disorder absorbed from the man he passes between his cell and the visitor's block.*

When next he looks, the stag stands next to his car. In the winter air, its breath is a fumarole. Sulphurous, preceding terrible things. He closes the curtains, steps away.

From his duffel bag, he grabs the bottle of clozapine. Looks at the innocuous shade of orange-brown, the white label. *Take half pill for first week with food. Do not drink alcohol or operate heavy machinery while taking.* Night time seems as good an opportunity as any. If he has to stay another day, he has to stay another day. He won't risk the dogs if he can't drive a straight line, and all three of them have enough food to hunker down.

The dogs watch from the corner of the room - Will pacing at night isn't new to them.

The pill, no matter how small, drags even with water and the handful of peanuts he can manage. Milk would probably be better, but this isn't the kind of place you run down to the lobby for conveniences. Maybe a liquor store down on the corner, but Will has liquor, and he's afraid enough of modern medicine to not want to mix business with pleasure, no matter how much a glass of whiskey would settle him.

Down the hatch! he thinks. *How's it feel, being in Bismarck, North Dakota? How's it feel joining all the other deficients, only a well maintained savings account away from vagrancy?* (*You've avoided it so long - does it feel good to just give in for once? There's a long list of people who would say this is good for you.*)

It's a failure of character.

He's done so well up to this point. He had done so well before Garrett Jacob Hobbes, before Eldon Stammetts, before Elliott Buddish, before Tobias Budge and Abel Gideon. He had unhealthy coping mechanisms, but he did cope. The forts he built were nothing - Hannibal Lecter, conqueror in name and practice, lays bare the gate with a Trojan Horse. Will is so susceptible to kindness, it hurts him to accept it, and Hannibal vivisects him with hope between the trauma of sick mind to sick mind, opening ventricles and excising healthy tissue as he goes.

He wants a glass of cognac anyway, to chat in the drawing room, for some kind of assurance that he's normal for his abnormal life. "An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior," Hannibal would say, and Will would sigh in relief. He crawls into bed, more miserable that he can remember being for weeks.

The scraping continues - he's not stupid, he knows it's a long release medication. He just needs to make it through tonight, and ignore the humid breath of the stag that has followed him like a shadow for months. It's the most helpless he's felt since the day the FBI arrests him for the murder of Abigail Hobbes. There's no rational responses to phantoms. There are no actual sick days in life - he can't just skip school tomorrow and feel better. This could be the rest of his life, the way that he's been told staying untreated would be. Like there's some kind of clear treatment for feeling too much.

His heart races all night. He texts his father in the early morning hours. ***I miss you*** , he says.

Do you want me to come visit? , comes the unexpected reply. Beau must be drinking. Beau is always drinking if it's after midnight. They are synched in their late night misery, some kind of genetic predisposition to nocturnal depression. ***Could fly to you. Don't know where you are, but I'll figure it out.***

No, he replies. Beau needs to stay where he's at. They've never been so close that Will could cry on his shoulder, or not feel like he's shepherding him from one city to another. He just feels small, and even as an adult, years removed from the boats of Biloxi, Sandusky, and the Atlantic coast, Beau is bigger than real life. ***I just sometimes want to come home.***

He stays an extra day.

He crowds the dogs into the bed, and apologetically walks to the front office. Yesterday's boy is replaced by an older Native American woman with a heart-shaped face. A long scar trails from the side of her temple to her jaw. Something domestic, he supplies mentally. Maybe an alcohol fueled argument, or maybe something more mundane - a car accident. She's heavy set, but cheerful in her puffy jacket and woven scarf. Will thinks she's very beautiful, even more so for the scar.

"No worries, honey," she says. "There wasn't someone knocking down the door for the room anyway."

He leaves a day later - he leaves them a box of small town donut shop donuts as a thank you. It feels appropriate. Two doses into into the clozapine, he feels the world shifting like a tide. Food is ashy, everything makes him sick to his stomach, even old fallbacks. Will absolutely hates it, and knows that he's got to keep trying. But he's stable enough to drive - he feels relatively clear, and the road is an unwavering straight band into the west of the world. He can move to the next port.

North Dakota is grey, brown, and white in the plains during the end of winter. Even with the heater on in his car, the dogs have taken to crowding each other in the front seat, and Will fills the passenger side foot well with his possessions to help them sit as close as possible to the air vents. They only perk their heads up when he slows between towns.

The front seat begins to look like a mountain of blankets. For every town they pass, there is a thrift store with crocheted and quilted blankets looking for homes. Will is grateful to his dogs for their infinite patience, and rewards them with growing beds. Even if they don't know any better, they grudge the winter cold for him. He loves them more than anything, hands seeking out Buster's coarse hairs and Winston's thoughtful face.

Will has a few moments that he despairs in the days between the first anti-psychotics and the crawl to Montana. Food not only doesn't nourish him, where a perpetual nausea is taking up residence, but it continues to not taste of anything. He could be equally as happy eating the yellowed dead grasses of the plains as he is ordering a hamburger or pancakes. Were it not for fear of dizziness and the gnawing of hunger, he would stop eating entirely.

Intellectually, Will knows he's depressed. He has no friends, save the dogs, but they aren't able to challenge him on mental health, current news, his avoidance of people he knows. His phone is largely quiet, but Beau has taken up a strange habit of telling him about his day via text message. The Kansas City Royals are doing good in baseball. Beau sees a white egret mid-day and gives him a fish he has set aside for angling this weekend. Beau thinks Will should come down to Georgia.

Will is tempted. Will is also afraid to turn around.

Will, for all his faults, doesn't want the dogs to suffer. He is not suicidal, even if the joy of food or sleep is disappearing. Winston and Buster think he is where the sun rises and sets. Winston and Buster nose at his right arm to stop, and admire historical locations, small state parks, the rise of the mountains on the western frontier. Montana is growing before them.

Billings, Montana is something he both has and hasn't seen before. It follows the tried and true format - historical downtown, a surprising number of businesses that have clearly come from out of state investors, and well meaning locals that are trying to reclaim the identity of their environment. It's not as popular as the mountain towns, but it's at the portal edge. The 94 highway has led him straight to it, and Will is tired again.

He tries to stay near the Yellowstone River - here lies unexplored country for a nomad's son, and even if the drugs aren't helping him be peaceful, placid water helps. Eventually he settles into another motel with internet, and an attached restaurant with chicken-fried steak.

"Best you'll get anywhere around here," says an older woman of a waitress, Linda with the grey hair and the boisterous laugh. Another beautiful woman, no matter her age or weight. Will admires the humor she has when he shows up looking like death's grave. "You look like you could use some coffee and some sugar, baby. Let's get some grease in you."

"What's the gravy like?" Will asks with a half-smile. "I'm from the South, and I'd like to think I'm not a snob, but I'm looking forward to this."

"White as the driven snow, son," she says. "Peppery until it burns. Don't ask me what's in it. It's sure as hell not vegan."

Daddy liked chicken-fried steak, has ordered it in every restaurant between Canada and the Gulf of Mexico. Takes the shittiest cuts of meat and makes them salty and delicious with roux and pepper. Will develops a taste for it in New Orleans when dinners happen at 3 in the morning, when interviews are completed and he can finally have a seat. The 24 hours following a homicide are always difficult - if he doesn't get them solved then, he probably won't. No one needs long term patterns for petty theft murders and drug deals gone bad. Everything is an event of circumstance, not premeditation.

Will should have stayed in homicide. His close rate was good, and he understood people in a simple way. He has an allegiance to the working poor and the cash strapped. He understands them, black, white, or brown. He can eat late night chicken fried steak, and he can be weird without anyone sending him to prison for it.

The gravy is a little too thick in Billings, Montana. He's thankful for Linda's sense for humor and easy pours of coffee anyway. He buys a cheap steak combo to bring to the dogs, and tips too much.

It's a relief to have a more modernized space this time, something with an ethernet port and rules about downloading data. Will is not in the business of porn, but he's not so high and mighty to think that the truckers and business travelers of Billings are beyond it. Were it not for his own reluctance to engage with it and lack of interest, he suspects he could well be part of the clientele they have to ask to please not use the WIFI to stream. (*What does get you going these days, Will? It might have been Alana Bloom a year ago, but now even the thought of her is enough to raise your hackles. You hope she's enjoying her stay in Chandler Square, that your abandonment has been enough of a catalyst to name you the villain, to overwrite any professional or personal thoughts of you.*)

His needs are simple - it's been a few days since the last check in, and other than a brief texted missive from the real estate agent and Beau's occasional interjections, he's been on radio silence again. He's overdue to see what foolishness is happening in his email account. He settles in with a water glass that is half-full of the Crown Royal he has been studiously ignoring. Blended whiskey can only improve his outlook tonight.

There are a few from both Alana and Jack. By now, the phone he has tossed has run out of power, and the use of voicemail has passed. With Jimmy Price aware of his housing sale, the dominoes are falling for them. Without a house or a contact number, email is an easy pursuit.

Will doesn't bother opening them - he deletes them. There's nothing to say that would have him drive the almost 2,000 miles back. He wishes them well. He wishes them gone.

In a real upset of the status quo, there is a singular email from Hannibal. He marvels at the academic email address, previously unseen. Will wonders if Hannibal has retained it for academic purposes, or if he thinks Will would block a private one. Does someone like Hannibal Lecter have a private email address, loaded with personal significance? He's in knots when the preview and body text open.

From: ***hlecter@johnshopkins.edu***

To: ***wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org***

BCC: ***52hertzgraham@gmail.com***

FW: Ongoing Appointments

Will,

I have it on good authority that you're no longer in Frederick Chilton's care as a patient - I must congratulate you. Every day must look brighter by comparison.

I have left your Wednesday appointment time open, 7:30 pm assuming a lack of case files and FBI long distance trips. Dr. Bloom tells me you have not consulted for several weeks at this point, so I must ask for the sake of record keeping, do you have an interest in returning to our conversations? It would be remiss of me to release it to another prospective client without confirming first, and I suspect we have a great deal to talk about since our last opportunity. I have been unable to reach you by phone, but as I have been told, no one is really able to reach you these days. You perch on a very high cliff. Be careful. I do not want you to fall from it.

I hear you are to be congratulated - selling a house is no small decision. I wonder if the decision isn't a little hastily made. Or are you choking up something else on the property, Will? A little hesitant to engage on what little you recall? Maybe a little shame-faced to set unsuccessful orderlies loose on me? We could both use an honest conversation to clear the air.

I look forward to speaking with you - it's very unlike you to abandon answers, and you are always missed like the ship crossing in the night that you are.

-H. Lecter

The message arrives early in the morning of today. Hannibal must be restless from being ignored, egoist that he is. Will is choking down white bread toast and gravy when Hannibal is thinking of him. The temptation to read it over and over again is rising, and even as he finds his eyes glazing up to the greeting again, the other hand clicks delete. It's gone, the forwarded email list rendered to a list of polite inquiries yet again.

Ignore it, he thinks. *He's just trying to get a reaction,* he thinks.

Will is painfully lonely, even with Winston and Buster leaning against him. It would be so easy to call Hannibal. The number is on the tip of his tongue. He feels relatively certain Hannibal would drop whatever he was doing to answer. Will's not so stupid to think it would be out of the goodness of his heart, so much as Hannibal can't bear an ignored missive. Deleting his email is as good as a neon sign to string Will up like a smoked herring. Will looks forward to it - feels the intimacy of cotton cord running between his gills.

Another email for the agent sits unread. Will shakes off the rust of Hannibal. (*Rust is just decay, you think.*) It's almost been a week that his home is on the real estate market. There's got to be some good news somewhere.

Incidentally, there is. Somebody has blown all the other offers out of the water, twenty-five thousand above asking price, and a provision saying they'll match any that bid it up with a shorter escrow period. It's about the best scenario that Will can ask for. He's relieved, and the agent's words by email are practically vibrating with excitement, until a line stands out from Will's computer screen like a flag.

The offer is from a private buyer - the only thing weird about their offer is that there's no real estate agent, but instead a law firm. Some investor type of guy wants it, I think they might be some kind of a...crime enthusiast. We can totally keep taking in offers if you'd like to work with another realtor on the buyer's side of the sale, but this is pretty amazing - no commission requirements, so I could do 5% instead of the 6 we discussed if that makes it better for you.

Will would bet it's Byron Metcalfe, Esq. Probably the fourth of his name in a long list of Byron's and Neville's and James's dating back to William the Conquerors book of lords in England, as one does.

He's probably representing another asshole with money, time, and a vicarious interest in the place that both is and isn't the final resting place of the Minnesota Shrike's last victim, completed by proxy. Probably someone who thinks they're writing the first biopic for Garrett Jacob Hobbes, or runs a podcast, like that's something worth discussing at the bar with the guys. And maybe it is. Maybe they can cast someone better looking than Will for his role when it's a film someday - maybe they'll call him to play himself. There's no one quite like him, is there?

So someone with money and time wants his house and wants to overpay for it. Will doesn't want it, so why should it matter if someone else does? Somebody bought the Amityville house, so why not his house too? (*You're going to end up as a talking point for a crime enthusiast's podcast someday too - the question remains if it's for what you didn't do, or something you haven't done yet.*)

Send me the paperwork , he replies. ***I accept. They have to accept a notarized copy of my documents for escrow. I won't be back for an in-person signing. That part is non-negotiable, "crime enthusiast" or not.***

His stomach is curdling when he clicks send.

He takes another half-dose of clozapine, despite the alcohol - he wants to sleep tonight without the clicking of hooves in the parking lot, without reaching out to his father like a child. (*Your health will never truly further recover from the plasmapheresis and delayed treatment. You might have seizures for life - you can deal with heartburn and cramps to sleep this time. You can't deal with not knowing if you're awake.*) Montana or not, the elk aren't likely to descend into this part of Billings to stand in the cold white glow of the street lights, scrape against the eaves of new construction. Each prong lit up with a promise, like a rib from Cassie Boyle rising up from the cold grass.

Drawing the white sheets and ugly coverlet up, he allows Winston to join him under the covers on the bed as he did in Bismarck. Buster's small body winds into his side, small pointed face held up by Will's shoulder. While he doesn't relax immediately, the soft undulations of their breath help ground him in the moment. He'll have cramps from laying still for them, but he loves them.

They are alive, as is he.

Chapter End Notes

I had to divide the chapter in half because it ran spectacularly long, so I'm posting early.

Soap box: I have exceedingly strong feelings about mental health care. Will would struggle so much in an American structure with an emphasis on pharmaceuticals. They're not designed for someone like him, and I am sorry for people who do have to use anti-psychotics that make them feel physically bad in a world where they already feel mentally bad.

Also, thank you to everyone who engaged me in the reviews last chapter - I really do love discussing the characters critically, and getting thoughts from other people challenges my perception of them to make better stories.

act 1 - until i am compelled to believe otherwise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sheets are covered in dog hair, and Will Graham can't be bothered to mind. Blackout curtains keep all but a sliver of light from peeking in on the sides of the window, and each dog has moved away from him in the night, little feet pushing into him. He hasn't slept particularly well, but he smiles when he pushes Buster's legs out from his side, and the small dog sighs. He doesn't often anthropomorphize his dogs, but the annoyance from the Jack Russell Terrier is unmistakable. Winston, by comparison is just annoyed by Will getting out of bed to take a shower, taking the warm spot in the mattress for himself.

An assessment - Will does not feel energetic, even with the replenished sleep. He is unsteady on his legs. He has been warned that he would not feel well on the full diet of pills he has been given. He drinks water from the tap like it's been weeks. His lips are chapped with the cold air, from chewing on them when there's nothing else nearby to abuse. The car has been cold enough that he has taken to wearing gloves when driving, instead directing the air vents to the dogs. It keeps him from chewing his nails and skin around them absently.

Will does not check his email. Will turns off his phone. He'll get back on the issue of home equity when he gets the chance.

Separate from that, what he does feel is restless, which is a new emotion for today. New since he left the house. He doesn't know where he's going, only that he should see something with that time. Obviously the dogs aren't going to make decisions for him. After a shower, and after reassembling his overnight bag and taking his daytime medications, he thinks: what next? (*And isn't that a million dollar question?*)

The entire drive to this point has been aimless, other than vague thoughts of fishing towns in places he's never been. He keeps to the shoals of bodies of water. He looks for rivers and lakes and presumes it will be enough to feel good. But now he is west of anything he knows - what's the plan, Mr. Will Graham?

From his duffel, he grabs the Rand McNally maps. He appreciates a good digital map, but there's something satisfying about the glide of a cheap ballpoint pen on the paper, tracing charts, circling beautiful things.

Will can find things to bring him awe. He can't undo what he is; only find a valley for it to roll into and settle.

Yellowstone National Park, says the sign, half buried in snow. He had been warned that the conditions weren't good. "Come back in the spring," says the receptionist. "You can go up to the north gate, but I think most of the things that tourists are interested in aren't really accessible if you aren't savvy with snow shoes or an ice axe."

Will gets the vibe she's told a few people this. Will also gets the vibe that she thinks he's an idiot for not researching it ahead of time. *Behold, Google*, her eyes seem to say from underneath her blunt cut bangs.

Behold, human impulsiveness! thinks Will, passing the keys to the hotel room over and herding the dogs back into the car. Their walk has been unpleasant this morning between a cutting north wind and Will's cotton mouth from drinking.

From the car, the mountains rose up in great glacial peaks. The constant rattle of cinder on the roads beats against the undercarriage of his car - he has tire chains for ice, but the black-red of the roadway has been clear up to this point. He has been remarkably blessed for northern climate weather. Will had initially planned a diversion up to Glacier National Park, but after a lecture from a holier-than-thou local in the diner, he thinks better of it.

He mostly just doesn't want to prove the guy right by getting stuck in a mountain pass. Small mercies, he thinks. Donner, party of three, he jokes.

At the visitor center for the park, he accepts pretty quickly that the dogs will not be able to accompany him to many places, and plans accordingly. He's made the journey down, and will enjoy a couple things, but even he has to acknowledge the limitations of having two animals that can't venture onto the park paths with him.

Perhaps it's kismet - the only things that are really open aren't far from the road. He's heard plenty of jokes in his day from the company his father keeps and from the federal employees in DC that the park service really doesn't like to work in the cold, like that's something unreasonable. It snows off and on weekly - what's the use of clearing trails for people who won't heed the warnings?

From the steaming pools of Mammoth Hot Springs, Will admires the great clouds of white that rise up into the freezing air. He can't see the falls or the major features of the great caldera, but what's the point if he's just ticking boxes down? He smells the sulphur, and takes comfort in it - everything here could destroy the continent, given the right epoch. He is small, and inconsequential, and he is ok with jogging back to the car to walk and water the dogs before they must leave again.

He changes his course more southward into Idaho. Will toys with the idea of the Grand Tetons, but faced with similar circumstances to Yellowstone, he feels guilty at the prospect of leaving the dogs in the car to wait for him to look at more mountains. There will be plenty of time for that as they head westward, into the Sawtooths and Cascades.

What next? He asks Beau, sending a picture of himself with the dogs, angle not quite working but catching his face and the sign for Yellowstone behind them.

Craters of the Moon , says Beau. ***If it's dry. Unless you just like looking at snow. Gotta have enough of that in the Dakotas already.***

Will agrees - the weather has been kind to the south of the Sawtooths and high desert there. Looking over the black soil and craggy surface, he recalls a missing persons case he read up on, and has lectured on in the past.

"Not every missing woman is a murder," he says, pulling up a projector slide of empty basalt stone fields. "Everyone is capable of hubris as much as they are murder. Dr. Jodean Elliot Blakeslee and her friend Amy Linkert were found dead from exposure. They had died in the winter conditions, dogs, purses, and phones found in their cars. No further investigation was merited - can you tell me why?"

Fighting the need to walk further afield, Will has no further questions. He would be at peace rendered to nothing but a body here. The stars must twinkle in the absence of all others.

“Hey daddy,” he says one night, calling Beau while drinking a tallboy of Coors, shacked up in a motel near Boise. It won’t play well with his medication when he takes it later, but he’s tried to be good for a couple of days now, and talking to Beau always makes him want to drink. The ground is always churning under him like he’s aboard a ship when he sits still like this, but that seems to be the new normal - printed in tiny letters as a common side effect on his white paper prescription bags. “How’s the fishing?”

Beau coughs a little. He’ll be on the porch right now, listening to crickets - it’s later in Georgia. It’s the first time they’ve been in a different time zone from each other and talked on the phone, and Will has to realign his picture of what Beau Graham is doing in tandem with him. They’ve always talked pretty rarely, and any changes to routine make it harder to push through for Will. That’s not the kind of relationship they have.

“Fine, fine, jus’ the occasional trout n’ bass down near th’ marsh,” he says. There’s a little static on the line, and a pause. “You worry me, boy. Doin’ a lotta drivin’. What’cha doin’ in Idaho these days?”

“Some sight-seeing. Found myself in the area, and thought I should cover it.”

“A long vacation you got there. You not workin’ for th’ FBI now?” says Beau. “You had your heart set on it, not even ‘dat long ago.”

“Things change,” says Will. The uncomfortable chair in the hotel room doesn’t really allow him to lean back, just lean forward on the built-in desk. It’s dark - he hasn’t turned on any of the lamps. “They asked me to do something that was unfair.”

“You concerned wi’ fairness now?”

“Less that I used to be.”

“Tha’s how it goes. I used t’ chafe at unfairness, now I jus' get even. You remember th’ man in Biloxi?”

The man in Biloxi - a dockyard owner, who thought to embarrass Beau. Will can remember his ripping into his son’s shy and nervous disposition; called him a faggot, and a retard. At the age of 7, pretty blue eyed Will hadn’t known how to respond, but Beau comes up directly and let’s him know exactly what he thinks of that. Will remembers the vivid red of the man’s face when Beau beats his nose in so hard that it’s not a bloody nose so much as an eruption. Hits him so hard both of his eyes are blacked for weeks, a greasy looking purple smear beneath each. No one calls the cops - it’s just not how it’s done in those days. The man wears them silently for weeks, nose crooked and smashed likely for life.

“Yes daddy, I remember.”

And Will does, and appreciates it and what it was.

For what it’s worth, and should surprise no one, Will inherits his temper by normal means. Punnett squares, the inextricable linking of DNA, and small petty town upbringings that make unstable but usually kind men like Beau Graham.

His father, a slurring depressive man that he’s been since the 80s and Will’s mother passing away, is the only constancy Will has as a child. Beau, bless him, tries for years to not let anger be his primary emotion around his sensitive and dutiful son. He failed often - he was never capable of taking an insult, or turning a cheek. He fights his lot in life with the intention to deal hurt like a hand of cards every time. (*Like you, Beau is an angry man. Beau has just grown into his anger, and you are still testing the edges of yours.*)

It’s the cruelty of his temper that he learns from other people, watching and learning as ducks take to water. A dozen impatient instructors, random thoughtless people on the street, self-important cadets at the academy - the world is full of poor examples for a man like Will who absorbs their violence like dew on grass.

Hannibal Lecter, a Faustian ubermensch for whom cruelty is the point, is an instructor that Will is afraid to watch for too long. His casual joy, amusement, clinical and academic interest, all the while he destroys flesh to recreate it into something more pleasing...well that's a skill Will hasn't picked up before. Will's afraid to become more like him - he's also afraid that Hannibal is right, and he always has been.

(*You've never asked if your father felt the same bright feeling you felt when Garrett Jacob Hobbes hits the side of the kitchen counters, bleeding from multiple bullet wounds. You know he's proud of his own violence, but if it's for the violence or for the result it caused is unclear.*)

"'I don't like t' be messed with. You shouldn' let folks do it either. They do it again n' again when you do," says Beau.

"That's why I'm in Boise right now," says Will, singsong lightly. "Change of pace. Less opportunities to be poked."

"You got you'self a bully in Virginia, son? You oughta teach 'em a lesson."

"A few of them," he hums. "I don't think they're the type to be instructed, just to teach." Will stands up from his chair, paces, glances out his hotel room window at the parking lot, the glow of an old neon sign for a diner casting pink and yellow on puddles spread across it. "Hard to deliver justice, when it's a group and everyone's pointing fingers at each other to assign blame."

"Well fuck 'em," says Beau. "It's a big world." Will hears the clink of ice in a glass, his daddy taking a long drink. He hisses when he's done. His breath will smell of alcohol, he'll lean back on his sun porch chair. Same routine, same punchline delivery, even 25 years later. "You' a smart boy," he says. The way he says boy is always so boisterous, barely more than one long vowel, the same tone no matter if it's affectionate or in anger. No one sounds like Beau to Will - he is entirely singular in the pages of his mind, a cornerstone. "Do whatever you want."

Will hums, throws back the rest of his beer. Like father, like son.

Beau clears his throat. “But don’t move t’ California. Damn socialists and damned expensive. I won’ visit if you do,” he grumbles. “Better in goddamn Canada... at leas’ the fishin’s good there. Go somewhere respectable, like Alaska, maybe Washington.”

Will laughs, one bright sharp note. The dogs raise their ears, and Will settles Buster when he comes to check on him. “Yes, sir,” he says, and feels good for a moment. “Hadn’t even considered that yet.”

“Lemme know when you do pick a spot to drop anchor. You’ always goin’ on about people goin’ missin’ and showin’ up dead, you made a whole career onnit. I’m worried ‘bout you by you’self.” Beau sounds how he must feel - awkward. He’s not an expressive man. Will’s occasional text messages must stay with him more than Will thought.

“Of course, daddy. And I’ve got the dogs. Really, statistically speaking, as long as I avoid Interstate 5, my odds improve significantly of not getting axe murdered.”

“That so? Well here's to sayin’ no to Interstate 5, and not gettin’ axe murdered.”

“Cheers to that.”

Will pops open another beer, and throws back his nighttime pill doses with a cold swig.

They stay a little longer in Boise - he needs the notary agent to help him close the escrow, and bad weather discourages him from heading north to the Snake River and high desert of Washington. As he suspects, when the sales contract comes back, the buyer is the Metcalfe Law Firm, who will transfer the house title to the client after closing. Very hush hush, and Will laughs a little at the secretiveness of buying a rural farm in Virginia. Like it’s a significant thing - Will doesn’t think he’ll ever see it again, doesn’t care if they level it for a McDonalds or put a goddamn sex swing in the middle of the living room. When he sees the finished documents go to the fax machine, he’s not quite relieved, but unburdened somehow.

The notary assisting him is in a small neighborhood post office, a gaunt looking gentleman in his twilight years. He is torn between processing packages for the locals, and rushing back to the counter to help make sure Will is signing all the right lines and adding initials where appropriate. He reminds Will of Stammets in a lot of ways, wonders how many aging white single males are struggling to connect the same way across the country. In a fit of bad humor, he has half a mind to invite the clerk mushroom hunting on the weekend - apparently a legitimate pursuit in Idaho and Oregon.

"You should teach your dogs there," says a man at the diner across the street from his motel. The man has a trucker's hat, but the easy disposition and sensible work clothes of a farmer. His fingernails have dirt or oil under them. He likes to chat. Will's seen him a few times here - a regular, unlike him just passing through. The waitresses know how he takes his coffee, and he gives the dogs a scratch each time they happen upon him. He doesn't ever ask his name. "Worth hundreds of dollars if you found a good truffle. Nice way to spend the weekend in the woods. The red one looks smart."

Good people are kind to dogs. Will is patient with the man, even if he is annoyed with the intrusion. He doesn't get to talk to many good people.

Will has been eating french fries on the patio, absently passing scraps to the two hopeful animals at his feet. He doesn't have an appetite, stomach upset again.

"Smarter than me," says Will, stroking Winston's ears. He smiles briefly. "If they keep eating my french fries, they're going to have to get a job finding truffles or I'll starve."

"No offense meant, but you look like you should be eatin' those french fries, not them."

"Probably," Will responds. He pours some more ketchup into the fry basket, more than is really reasonable. His next bite is wet, sweet, and salty, and his belly rails against it, but it does have a flavor, even if the only flavor is Heinz.

Leaving on Highway 84, Idaho returns to the empty plains that Will had been relieved to leave behind for mountains and water. It's of course to be expected - a basin and range topography requires a basin, and rain shadows make for desolate landscapes, but Will has largely grown in the woods and swamps of the south, and he is tired of the massive stretches of grass. The Blue Mountains are to his left, the welcome to Oregon sign on his right, and if he follows the Snake River Valley to its tributary into the Columbia River, Will knows the sea can't be long after.

This snapshot in time: two dog snouts rest peacefully on the console, breathing puffs of air onto his arm. They ground him, even as things blur into the quiet desperation he felt in the Dakotas. He's medicating, he's eating, he's trying to sleep between dreams. His house is sold, proceeds transferred to a trust, and his bank account is solid for the foreseeable future.

All things considered, Will's privileged to be where he is now.

But he's still adrift. (*You have no anchor to drop - you didn't know how to tell Beau that without sounding pathetic. It's pathetic now in your head too* .) He doesn't know what he's trying to achieve. He has to keep driving because there's nothing here for him anymore than there was in Wolf Trap. Maybe he'll just drive them all directly into the Pacific at first sign of a cresting wave. Just continue through the sand to the first drag of water, the flooding of the engine, the windshield breaking at the force of salt water pounding against it. Water going from foot to knee to chest. Lifting up over his chin to fill his ears, clouding his visions with grey water. Onward, over continental shelf, into the dark. He feels goosebumps from viciously cold water, the grit of sand in his teeth. A rush of brine down his throat into burning lungs.

(*"Full fathom five thy father lies. Of his bones are coral made," Hannibal says, admiring a glass of white wine, your face warped in its rounded reflection. His gaze is unnerving - he always unnerves you when he is focused like this, cheekbones and eye sockets like hollows at night. "Those are pearls that were his eyes. Into something rich and strange."*)

Will blinks it away with a gasping breath, and counts backwards from 100. Measures time in his accelerated pulse rate. The dogs are still asleep. The landscape is still grass.

Will does not know the geography of Oregon. Driving into the Columbia River Gorge for the first time, he is stricken by how different a river it is, great reaching walls of rock on either side of a wide payne's grey river, clouds thick and brushing the tops of the mountains and spruce trees. It's unlike any other place he's been to. In a rare event for their trip, Will pulls the car aside to look at Mt. Hood to the south and Mt Adams to the north, peeking between cracks in the cloud cover, looming beautiful and terrible. (*You have a lot in common with them, flirting with the sprawl of humanity, ready to succumb to natural-born violence in good time. Their grandeur encourages all to forgive their ills - if only you were so large and sparkling white too* .)

Tonight's repast and recreation takes the guise of an inland port. The town of Hood River sits perched on its edges, built into the hills where the heavily forested Hood River meets the Columbia. The verticality of the old city center appeals to Will, watching the lights of the neighborhood come alive as night begins to roll in, the gold and white of windows twinkling in the gloom. Shipyards serrate the river's edges, steam billows from a smokestack. It feels old. It has a taste of the Smoky Mountains, but with deeper furrows, more darkly guarded.

His hotel room is like a small apartment on the corner of the building, something poorly insulated and frontier-like. The glow of the hotel sign directly comes into the room, and Will spends a few minutes trying to maneuver the curtains to let in a little less red. The space feels like being trapped at a stop light without it. The bed is big, and the dogs settle in quickly, while Will gets his laptop out to check in.

The usual influx of bullshit emails is there, but the volume he receives from individuals is starting to increase. It's actually comical how many are from Jack at this point, and he appears to have caught on to Will probably not even looking at them. It would require a subpoena for the academy to give over his email credentials, so likely still no risk of them finding his automatic forwarding address. ***FW: PICK UP YOUR PHONE,*** reads one subject line. ***FW: YOU'RE BEING CHILDISH*** , says another. ***FW: THIS IS IRRESPONSIBLE*** . Jack has always written in all caps, a particular habit of the military that Will finds obnoxious.

I know you are, but what am I , thinks Will. He deletes them. He more or less got the jist of it.

A different email, for his doctor.

From: ***aschroedermd@arlingtonmedicalgroup.org***

To: ***wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org***

BCC: ***52hertzgraham@gmail.com***

FW: Prescription Follow-Up

Hi Mr Graham,

My assistant tried to get in contact with you recently, but hasn't been able to reach you by phone. We saw that you filled the prescription for the clozapine, and I just wanted to check in and make sure that you were feeling ok - a lot of people struggle in the first week, where others do when they go up to the full dose.

I did have a request for a medical information release this week from another professional that I understand you've worked with recently - a Dr. Lecter in Baltimore. We chatted on the phone briefly, and he had a release form from last year, so we did share some of the prescription names you had filled recently, but not much else since our records team is still waiting on some documents from Johns Hopkins and Baltimore State Hospital. He thought we should probably have discussed the clozapine with him first since you have a history of absence seizures, so I apologize if we haven't picked the best treatment method - we ordered what is standard for recovery care with the information available and your recent history with psychiatric pharmaceuticals. If you can return the attached form, I can make sure that he's looped in on future developments. We use a slightly different permission for collaborations and the date is almost expired on Dr. Lecter's, so unfortunately the currently existing one won't pass the HIPAA compliance.

Give our office a call if you're having any serious side effects - and don't hesitate to go to the emergency room if you're experiencing seizures. Dr. Lecter is right if you are experiencing absence seizures, that the clozapine will probably aggravate it. We don't want to develop any further complications with that. I'd like to check in again when it's time to order the ongoing dosage, or I can defer that to Dr. Lecter if you prefer. I'd also like to order a white blood cell count when you are available to make sure you're doing ok on the immunosuppressants.

-Dr. Analiese Schroeder, MD. , PhD.

Internal Medicine / Immunology

For a white hot second, Will feels furious, can feel his fingers closing over the edge of his laptop to start bringing it down over and over and over again on the console table in front of his chair. He doesn't - just barely. He actually replies with his current email address, and regrets the oversight - truly, there is no more profound an opportunist than Hannibal Lecter. Truly, how he leads people around by the snout without them realizing is artful.

Dr. Schroeder,

Please do not share any of my information with Dr. Hannibal Lecter, through his private practice or his faculty association with Johns Hopkins. I have stopped seeing him as a psychiatrist, and do not take medical advice from him, or allow him to make medical decisions on my behalf. The clozapine is fine - nauseating, a little dizzying, but it helps. Don't let him disable my ability to renew the subscription without my explicit permission. I'm happy to state my intent to accept responsibility for any adverse effects in relation to seizures if that will be sufficient. My current cell phone number is as below. I'll call you a couple days before when I need to renew - I am traveling and can't set a date for a lab test just yet.

He breathes through his nose, waiting for his heart to slow as he clicks send. He doesn't actually know if the drugs are helping, but he wants to decide for himself. He's done with other people deciding. He has half a mind to write an email to Hannibal to tell him to fuck himself on his HIPAA consent forms.

Clearly the psychiatrist doesn't expect it to go through - he either would have forged them already, or email Will trying to make an argument for a new appointment. He got some information out of the medical office anyway - Hannibal will consider that some kind of a victory, but there's nothing he can do with that. No address, no current contact that would be different from what he already knows.

It's fine, it's fine, it's fine.

Will closes his laptop, walks out of the room and locks the door.

Will is determined to get out of his funk tonight. He likes it in Hood River, the particular miasma of night near a body of water falling on the town. If he were a vacationing kind of man, he would probably come here, rent a boat, maybe hike. He stretches his legs, walking up and down the main street, looking into storefronts, works on getting his heart rate up from aerobics instead of anxiety. Real estate agencies, wine bars, sporting goods for the mountains and water, tourist tchotchkes and local travel guides paint the street.

Your mountain adventure awaits, says one hand calligraphed sign, stylized geometric peaks behind it. It's a little trite - some kind of young hipster's ideal motivational piece. Adventures require a particular mindset, an absence of responsibilities. Will has always found mountaineering to be something of a selfish pursuit - different from merely enjoying the view from a tall height, more so the hubris of always seeking taller.

Mount Hood comes to mind, sitting like a great lazy tiger in its snows, quiet and unassuming in that it's caged in by small towns, ski resorts, hiking trails. Tame. Climbed hundreds and hundreds of times, congratulations exchanged over surmounted bergschrunds, couloirs, and massifs. Patiently awaiting the day it can obliterate itself like its sister across the river. "We couldn't have possibly planned for this," will say every government agency, every tourism department.

Let us help you achieve your goals , says another sign.

"Happy to help myself tonight," says Will, steamy breath billowing out from his mouth. He walks himself to one of the local breweries. He's been good - he's done what he's supposed to. He's kept from overdoing it, but tonight he thinks he'll treat himself. He congratulates himself for a day well driven, for covering another one of his bases.

Everything sounds exceedingly fancy on the beer tap sign, so he chooses a color of ale that pleases him, and drinks beer until he's barely able to stumble back to his hotel and throw up. With how little he's drinking these days and how vulnerable his body is taking different immunosuppressants, he almost feels bad for the bartender, a middle aged man who realizes too late that Will should be cut off way sooner than his norm.

When he navigates the stairs successfully (*You are a star!*), and rinses the bile from his mouth, he takes his medication on top of that with a glass of water, which makes him gag

them back up right after. Drunk Will has the audacity to wonder why that happened. Drunk Will doesn't care, as long as he gets to make the final call.

Falling into bed, something with big downy white sheets and a Pendleton blanket, feels good. He dreams the stag stands at the foot of the bed, trailing curls of steam rising to the high ceiling, black feathers catching the red vibrance from the sign outside. It hasn't been this close in a while. He supposes when he takes it correctly, maybe the medication does work. He's too sick to his stomach to try again tonight, the floor rolling like a wave.

Morning is rough - he orders some kind of lemon curd and goat cheese crepe downstairs, and three fried eggs. He gives guilty glances to the dogs, who don't understand why the first walk of the day is shorter. Will takes a half dose of the clozapine now, and promises himself to take more this evening.

He's responsible for his own consistency, and last night is a poor show of responsible adulthood.

West of Hood River is beautiful, more cavernous, more lushly forested and layered with ferns and small canyons, and waterfalls from alongside the road. He crosses the Cascade Locks on the Bridge of the Gods, and admires from the Washington side, where the sheerness of the Columbia's south shore is visible. The Cascades stand vigilant, dark rock in darker clouds.

Beacon Rock on the north side is a difficult hike, but dog-friendly, so he leashes up Winston and Buster to brave the sheer cliffside trail and frosty winds. The dizziness from his delayed pill this morning is somewhat harrowing on the narrow planks and rocky edifices, so Will finds himself clinging to the safety rails more than he has since he was a child. The view is indescribable. He tries to photograph it for Beau, and sends a shitty picture. Once it uploads, he writes:

Well, I tried anyway. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but I don't think one quite fits the bill.

It's midday, and there's no response. *Good* , thinks Will. He needs to be at work anyway. Not everyone can just climb rocks during work hours and generally be as non-useful as Will is insisting on being these days. Jack would be apoplectic about his free time, maybe send a few more all-caps email subject lines.

Longview, Washington straddles the Columbia between the states, filled with lumber yards, loading dock cranes, small fishing shops, and an entirely unremarkable urban center complete with Wal-Mart, Chinese takeout, and other sundries. It doesn't have the same historied quality of the places Will has stayed, but it is purposeful and industrial, and Will can understand that. Baton Rouge and Biloxi were much the same. Oil has to be received somewhere. Shipment manifests counted somewhere. Regulatory bodies and grocery stores somewhere.

The Lewis and Clark Bridge spans the river crossing back into Oregon proper, a cat's cradle of steel. It sits high up like a turnpike, but only lightly trafficked with countryside residents heading back into the recesses of home after a long work day. Will appreciates the overview, how the Columbia begins spreading her fingers out into a large sea of fresh water instead of the gently curving body he has followed up to this point.

Just on the south side of the bridge, on a turnout heading west to the coast, Will spots a bright blue Ford F-150. It's not vintage, but not new - something 80s and square. Hood up, an elderly gentleman is trying to look down inside the engine block, perplexed.

Will sighs, pity stirred. This is the kind of car he knows, and he has parts. It would be expensive for someone to tow him if the old man lives in the dense south forests. He finds himself pulling off to the side next to him, ready for a cantankerous old man. Maybe he can be useful here instead.

"Trouble?" he asks, rolling down his window.

The old man turns his head up. “Ahhh, something like that,” he says, gravelly voiced, a little nervous. “Stopped to top off the oil, but the oil cap got stuck down in the block. Did a stupid thing, thought I could balance it on top.” He looks behind Will, where both dogs are pushing around his arm to look out the rolled down window, and relaxes a bit. People really do warm up to dogs, scruffy white men in dirty station wagons or not.

“Let me get a flashlight and some wire,” says Will. “I don’t suppose you have a wire coat hanger?”

As it turns out he does - his name is Lawrence, which Will almost laughs at because really, what are the odds, and he’s just on his way back home after doctor’s appointments in Vancouver. (*“Not my best day,” says Lawrence. “Poked, prodded, and put out by the check oil light. Got my old girl back home to worry about!”*) While it takes Will a solid 20 minutes of fishing into the still quite hot underbelly of the engine, they do eventually get it to fall out the bottom. The old man doesn’t have a splash guard, both thankfully and unfortunately. It’s not the kind of fishing he normally does, but the relief on the old man’s face is extremely apparent. He checks the oil level for him, finishes off siphoning the oil into the car.

“Bless you, son. I was about five minutes away from just seeing what happens without the cap.”

“A fire,” says Will, laughing a little bit. “I can save you the trouble of finding out. It’s lucky it was a simple fix. We’ve been on the road for a while, so I have a collection of parts, but probably not enough to fit every model of Ford we run across on the way, and definitely not a generic oil cap.”

Lawrence is white haired and short, a little stout, but thin armed. Will suspects blood thinners, maybe diabetes. He has a good disposition though, mostly cheerful through the rescue attempt. “Where you headed to? You’ve got yourself a menagerie in there - real happy little people, dogs are.”

“Ah,” Will hesitates. His head hurts. “Just out to the coast. We’re on a road trip, so I just drive until we get tired and find something cheap for the night.”

“Your dogs friendly with other dogs? House broken?”

Will is almost offended. “Yeah, absolutely. I take them with me everywhere.”

“You said you’re heading down the coast?” asks Lawrence, with the look of someone weighing something. Will nods. “I don’t live too far from here, in Clatskanie. Should put you in the right direction in the morning, and the highway isn’t a very safe drive in the dark anyway. Read in the paper that there’s a storm coming in.”

“I don’t want to put you out,” Will says quickly. “I know what I look like,” he adds, a little gruff and embarrassed.

“What, a random man on the freeway that has out of state plates, or a sad, unhealthy boy with dogs?” says Lawrence, and while Will’s gut instinct is to sneer, to bite back against that description, Lawrence’s eyes are soft, rheumy, and blue. “It’s a little of both, by the way. You don’t scare me and I don’t got anything of value anyway. Besides, nowhere around here you’d want to stay if you’re going on the cheap and want to bring your dogs inside. Especially if you value your car.”

He doesn’t like charity, but he doesn’t really have an alternative picked out. Why not? Why go stay in a motel for yet another night, hoping that the sounds are nearby people instead of a more unpleasant alternative? The guy seems nice - there’s no real reason to say no.

(*Because you’re not safe for people* .)

Will nods shakily, rubbing his face, pushing at his glasses.

Clatskanie could be a transplant from the South, for all that it hits every hallmark of Will’s childhood against the banks of the Mississippi and Pearl rivers. The loneliest parish tucked into a pocket between Oregon and Washington, filled with estuaries and shabby docks, and one major road snaking through the middle of it. Mallards cluster in the shadow of a bridge, herons and egrets shining snowy white from the reeds, walking with the strange smooth motion of an expert fisher. (*You’ve admired them since you were a child - the unblinking*

yellow of their eyes, the sharpness of their beaks.) A tiny population of 1700 strong, a tenth of what Wolf Trap was.

The two lane highway divides it in half, the only artery out.

Following behind Lawrence, they take a left into a small, poorly paved neighborhood that brushes up against the hills that frame the town between them and the Clatskanie River. He is charmed to see the man's white house with grey gables, tiny diamond attic window like a star in the evening gloom. Set apart from the other houses in the neighborhood by vast green grass, he is reminded a little of his old home.

He lets the dogs out first, who bound into the yard with excitement. Lawrence unloads himself from his truck with the difficulty old age demands, but he's smiling when Buster runs up to greet him.

"You be nice to Sadie," he says kindly between stroking the little terrier's head. When he ambles up to the front porch ahead of Will and the dogs, he doesn't go inside, but instead gives a two fingered whistle, waiting. A white faced golden retriever walks out, tail wagging slow but pleased. "Sadie, we have guests," says Lawrence.

Buster and Winston are beside themselves with a new dog to meet. Everyone happily sniffs and brushes against each other, Lawrence and Will standing next to them with hands in pockets warding off the cold.

"Always glad for company," says Lawrence. "We don't get out much these days, probably God himself saying something by breaking my truck down so we could run into each other. Sadie probably gets tired of just me. Go ahead and grab your bag," he adds, turning back towards the house. "I'll get a pot of water boiling and some food going."

Will thinks that Lawrence goes to make tea when Will settles himself in a recliner in a sun room off the west side of the house, where a collection of plants is in varying states of health and decay. Little wooden shelves of African violets, shrivelled cactus, lipstick plants. Potted parlor palms, a ficus, more trailing pothos and philodendrons than a Thai restaurant. It

doesn't look like the work of Lawrence's hand, though the little gardening guide books and a messy potting table do. Probably not his pet project - just something he's inherited.

What Lawrence brings back isn't tea, it's hot toddies. Very liberally made, strong, hot toddies. Will's ears practically steam with bourbon.

"I love these," Lawrence confesses, a little twinkle in his eye when Will takes a big swig and looks up in surprise. "Routines are important, and this is mine. My wife, Peg, hated them. Said she either wanted a cup of tea or she wanted a whiskey." Will just smiles, and finds himself savoring the lemon and some grit from a sugar cube. The acidity is a little flat - probably juice from a bottle, but a pensioner like Lawrence hardly is going to keep a basket of fresh Meyer lemons on hand. (*You know someone who does - it's not something to be admired.*)

"My father is more of a straight, cheap whiskey blend kind of guy. Went through a phase with Sazeracs when I lived in New Orleans, but you become your parents is the usual adage, I think."

"I respect a man that drinks his liquor straight. I just also respect a little hot water and lemon to clear my throat," the older man says with a wink. "Good for your health in this weather." He takes another long draught, and looks at Will, even as he scratches Sadie's ears who is coming to circle and rest on an old floral blanket with pillows stuffed under it. At Will's side, Buster and Winston have made themselves at home, stretching out on the wood floor. "I wonder why you'd want to come back to this mud pit when it's so much nicer in the summer," adds Lawrence.

Lawrence is the first person in weeks that he's had a proper conversation with. In some ways, he feels clumsy - Lawrence wants to engage with him, and Will likes Lawrence. He's old and tired, but quick to grin, cleaning his coke-bottle lens glasses with a navy pocket square that he pulls from his trousers. Will's tongue trips over itself to explain why he's here, that he's not some sort of dangerous transient. (*Technically, you are. Here's an introductory course to playing at being a person in your newfound life.*) He doesn't know what to include, what to exclude.

He settles on "I'm moving on from a bad situation." Like it's not the understatement of the year. Like he's not in a bad situation now, and this is just a temporary reprieve.

“You have a hangdog look,” Lawrence fills in for him. “You’ve been good to me so far, so something tells me you’re somebody’s good son, but maybe someone’s not been very good to you.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Will snorts. “Do I really look that bad?”

“Skinny as a reed, and like you need to go to the barber shop,” says Lawrence, straightforward. “But your clothes are clean, and your dogs are groomed, so I still don’t think you’re the usual kind of trouble from the shipyards. Just young, nowhere to keep your feet from itching to keep walking. Trouble with a woman?”

“Not usually,” he laughs. “Left a job I thought I enjoyed.”

“Do something new every five years, I always say. You learn more things, and you’re never too knowledgeable to not enjoy what you do,” Lawrence says with a laugh. “Drove my wife crazy, but we did pretty good for ourselves. Not exactly buy a second house and retire in the southwest good - I’d rather keep this house, it was my mother’s, but we had kids, and a simple life.”

“Enviable in this day and age,” says Will. The picture is coming alive for him, what makes Lawrence what he is. Small town boy, best loved son, high school sweethearts, but recent widower. Lonely, holding the house together. Keeping things going, keeping the dog going until there’s nothing left that Peg loves to keep going.

“Peg was a wonderful lady. She’d probably die again if she saw what I was doing to her plant collection though.” He gestures vaguely, and Will can’t look away from the bruises on his arms, the sun spots from hard work. Thinning fingers, a slender men’s watch with a warm-brown band. Shiny gold band on his ring finger, swollen in place. “I’m not really a green thumb. I’m happy if the lawn stays green, and I live in Oregon, so that should tell all that story.”

“It looks good,” Will says, compelled by the drifting look in the old man’s eyes. Living somewhere else in the past - a greener sun room, and a greener lawn. “It’s a lot of work, keeping things alive.”

“We know that, don’t we Sadie?” says Lawrence, chuffing laughter wheezing out of him. “A couple of old broke-down jalopies ourselves.” He bends to rub her face, the dog’s eyes closed in easy happiness.

This could have been him, thinks Will. It still could be him. An elderly man with an elderly dog, holding down the fort, waiting for the slow march of time to erode them away. Maybe if he had stayed in the south, tried to find somewhere to call his hometown properly. Maybe if he had just been content to look at photos for analysis and profiling. Living unnatural deaths in technicolor steals a lot of futures from him.

“We’ll see each other out to the end,” Lawrence adds, patting Sadie again, and finishing his toddy. “Sadie’s a good girl - she can live as long as she cares to.”

There’s so much quiet exhaustion there - the last man standing. It matches his own, but it’s older, worn down like a mountain. Will’s own summit is still being cut away, weathering years of glaciation, isolation, vast stretches of time unmarked by others.

He feels the need to provide his company in the kitchen when Lawrence declares he needs some food before checking his blood pressure for the night, so Will keeps his hands busy. He’s used to playing occasional sous chef for a much more exacting person. They sit through bowls of spaghetti with store-bought sauce, Will adding some freshly minced garlic, seared onion, and poultry seasoning from the pantry to make it a little more interesting for Lawrence. (*“Well how about that!” says Lawrence. “Just like the Italian place on the highway!”*) They stand with each other cleaning dishes after, Will with the dish towel.

They both have a laugh when two tall glasses of water are responsibly filled to the brim for an even 16 ounce serving, and pill bottles are taken out. “Between the two of us, I reckon we have a pharmacy,” says Lawrence. “I thought I would have you beat, but you’re giving me a run for my money, kid. Should have given you another toddy to wash that all down.”

“I’m ashamed to admit I don’t have much other than the chairs in the sun room and the old twin bed upstairs, but it’s pretty comfortable, according to my niece. I can go grab some fresh sheets from the hall, and get you set up - I don’t think anyone’s stayed up there in a while,” says Lawrence. Will waves him off.

“The chairs are fine - I sleep in one when I visit my dad, and I think the dogs will be happier if I stay with them down here.”

Lawrence seems mildly anxious about hosting properly, but Will smiles, and tells him it’s what he prefers. Check your blood pressure before you go up the stairs. I can let Sadie out. Go to bed, I’ll see you in the morning. Things you tell parents. Will wonders at the absence of Lawrence and Peg’s children, and has a hard time setting his encroaching hurt for him aside. Will can’t claim emotional closeness with his dad, but he’d like to think he’d never leave him to quietly disappear in a pocket of nowhere. (*Grahams choose to do that to themselves, right?*)

He sleeps in the sun room with his dogs in front of a space heater, Sadie snoring in the way that only elderly fat dogs do on her mound of pillows. It’s charming.

He’s seasick on dry land again as his trifecta of medications begins working. Tonight’s his first full dose of the anti-psychotics, and he feels terrible, but Will, having read the hundreds of police reports, concludes this might be the one place he doesn’t want to show up on one as having “gone off his meds”. He’s in control of himself, but it’s been so long since he’s shared unmitigated space with another person, and he is desperate to do no harm.

The big picture windows of the sunroom look out into the woods, and he’s able to focus down on features of that instead. An owl starts hooting close to the eaves of the house - branches from the trees cast shadows in the moonlight. There’s no harsh street lights, and the dogs are softly sleeping near the hum of the heater, a fake Amish fireplace that has a warm glow.

When the first wave of nausea fades, he’s able to close his eyes, and just listen. Tonight is ok for the first time in a while.

Will sleeps unusually well. Apparently so much so that when he finally closes up the recliner to a normal sitting position, Lawrence is reading through his newspaper at the dining room table with a pink box of donuts and a cup of coffee.

“Plain glazed!” says Lawrence. “The only acceptable donut. Here son, have a seat, I’ll get you some of the black stuff. I have some milk and sugar, but no creamer. Doctor says my cholesterol isn’t good enough for creamer, so I’ve removed temptation.”

It’s an image straight from Will’s childhood, and he briefly misses Beau like a limb, sitting at the table and rubbing his face, glasses atop his head and out of the way. (*You’ve always been annoyed by them when they steam up over wide brimmed mugs. It’s nice to have the warm ceramic between your hands instead of a travel cup.*) Would it be like this if he moved to Georgia? His and Beau’s relationship isn’t affectionate, but it is companionable, the only father and the only son with an understanding of how solitary each is.

Alternatively, what would it be like to take up the laurels of a surrogate son? What’s his actual criteria for a place that’s good to stop on his trip, that fabled place to drop anchor? He’s ashamed at how desperate he is for normal, healthy connection. Lawrence, for all that his duty and desire to please saturates his every action with a stalwart exhaustion, and that bleeds over to Will, is a cool water to temper Will’s steel. He’s clearly lonely, and Will could wear a friend’s skin for him, even if it would hurt Will like a wound when he inevitably passed. He could live here in Clatskanie, and pretend.

(*You’ve known him for less than 24 hours, and already this is where you’re at after one night of slightly improved sleep. How miserable are you? No wonder Hannibal had you entirely figured out. It’s a mercy he didn’t pull your strings harder than he did, twist you into something* ***really*** *awful*.)

“Thanks,” Will says, a little tremulously when Lawrence hands him the mug. His eyes hurt, and he makes certain to respond at the right points as Lawrence rambles his way through The Oregonian’s second page.

Will texts Beau when he finds his resolve again. ***Glazed donuts today. Someone put me up for the night. Reminds me of you. Moving on soon - almost to the coast.***

“If you’re handy with boats and want to keep heading down to the delta, I’d check out Warrenton or Astoria,” says Lawrence, who tries to put on a happy face as Will gets his car prepped and the dogs walked for the morning. The old man has been glad of the company,

and now with the prospect of departure, the whole thing is colored wrong, has a bad taste. “Fish and game does a lot out that way too, and if what you tell me about your fishing habit is true, you might do a lot of good for them.”

Will shakes his hand. “Thanks for your hospitality, Lawrence. It was the best drinks and sleep I’ve had in weeks. I’ll let you know where I stop.” He hands Lawrence a slip of paper from a notepad - something with a veterinarian’s contact info on it, and a dog with hearts printed on the border. “This has my number on it - please call me if you need any help, even if it’s just watering the grass.”

“I will,” says Lawrence, taking it in a shaky hand - he’s probably developing a tremor. “Don’t stay on the road too long,” he says, clapping Will’s shoulder. “Lots of opportunities for happiness when you can get your feet to sit still for a bit. Can’t fish when you’re kicking up the water at the same time.”

The Astoria-Megler Bridge stands, a distinctive green color arching high over the grey water before descending to sit almost flush with the river’s mouth. The morning mist cuts through the high trusses, the safety lights twinkling in the haze. Ships pass under it, entering and exiting the river, guided by small boats. There are black cormorants, hazy rain. The seawater of the Pacific Ocean is rough beyond it, disappearing into the storms on the western horizon. He can’t see the north shore - Washington draws a veil over itself today.

The city of Astoria is the bank on the Columbia's southern side, a strange mixture of tall old buildings and short Victorian houses, brightly painted and flush against the aging piers and aging warehouses of the docks. The fluvial outwash of America coming to a halt at the edge. It’s both like Sandusky, and Bismarck, and Billings, and Hood River, and entirely its own creature. Older, maybe salted by the sea until preserved. The empty wideness of the river basin makes it feel small - he is disappearing into the Columbia’s outpouring, even as he withdraws to the safety of the woods at its banks. He is a tributary of his own now.

The last structures before the end of the world, the outpouring of volcanoes, and glaciers, and the lonely stretches of land to the east, and he has come to rest against it. It’s as good a place as any.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sitting still through the drive, kids.

And especially thank you for your thoughtful words, meta discussion, and patience. I am a weak person who likes to chat when I should be writing - it's satisfying to see you all here, real people on the other end of the screen. (Or you're all robots that pass a Turing test, which is even more amazing. Head canon accepted.)

act 2 - where a man sees and feels that he is a man merely

After a couple hours of looking out over a neglected pier where the stumps of old wood beams wave in the water like crumbling pillars, Will turns his mind away from the water and back to the land. (*You recede into things no matter where you go, feeling the edges of you try and find a good fit.*)

There's gulls yelling somewhere down the way. Water laps at the edge of the shore. It's peaceful.

He sighs, and scratches the dogs' heads, and climbs back in the car.

It's time to get started.

Port living requires something to bring to port. While Will knows he could comfortably spend money on long-stay motel rooms and rental apartments, the grey water where the Pacific and Columbia is soothingly dark. Will is tired of living out of his car. However, Will is not tired of having no permanent mailing address.

He will start simply, like Beau has done for them over and over in his youth - he will buy a boat.

Astoria is a relic of an older fishing industry, long since packed up and moved down the coast. The pickings are slim in town, where the majority of the craft have been more for business than leisure, and even then with a couple of decades of atrophy in between then and now. He's hardly going to stumble onto a fancy yacht or a pretty wooden sailboat in a place like this. He's going to be happy to find something with a bathroom. He's going to be thrilled if it doesn't need to be rebuilt from the bolts up.

Fortunately, the local coffee shop, an old mercantile that smells strongly of burlap and has been overtaken by thrifted books and plants gives him something to work with. A bulletin board, splashed with postings for activities, wanted ads, and sales flyers. He's a quick enough study to dismiss about half of it without taking long - too expensive, too busted up, wrong kind of craft, right kind of craft but wrong kind of interior.

He calls a man named Paul - he has something for him to see that takes Will clear back to his days on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

"Well, whad'dya think? Isn't she a beaut?" says Paul. He's oozing pride.

A 1970s Tollycraft 30' Express floats before Will in the old marina. It is without a doubt hideous on the inside, smelling of plywood and shoreline mildew in the old velvet cushions. Were it not for the missing oppressive humidity that he associates with the South, Will would think it's remarkably like a houseboat that he stays in for a small stint during high school, not long before the police academy. The smell of the sea is different here - he thinks he likes it, he thinks it smells of solitary coves, big oil tankers, cold brine.

With the shag brown carpet and brick red curtains, he also thinks they could film porn in this boat today, put it on a VHS tape, sell it as vintage, and no one would be the wiser.

"Well, she's something," mimics Will, mirroring Paul's ease.

The engine is fine, but it's old. Old onboard maps and navigation, probably old choked pumps and sketchy old wiring. It's lightly used - likely a cruiser for weekends, something you invite friends from the office to join you to ride on a day off. The little onboard bathroom smells of bright, blue cleaning solution. Will guesses that's the work of Paul's wife.

So that's something good he guesses.

The boat name on the back is chipped, but still a legible sun-bleached blue. ***A Daisy If You Do*** , it reads.

“Obviously she’s sat in the dock for a while, I just don’t have the time to do the maintenance or the fishing and my wife is giving me a hard time about it,” rambles Paul. “Between the harbor fees and the cost of repainting with the non-toxic hull sealant by next year, I just don’t think I can keep it. But it’s got good bones! Very comfortable, nice galley kitchen, the cushions are still springy and-”

“So you good with cash?”

Paul seems to kind of stall out on that, looking back with a squinting gaze to the front of the boat, where the dock faces another larger vessel, something shiny and white. A new money purchase - someone not very like Paul, and not very like Will.

Will looks more closely - he can’t really help it. Paul has a thick bushy mustache and wrinkled eyelids. Paul doesn’t look surprised so much as like an old western gunslinger at a shootout, measuring Will and his own boat up. Late 60s, retired, a little hen-pecked but a constant, good-tempered husband. He doesn’t want to sell his boat, but he loves his wife. Slight limp in the left leg - probably a work accident. Paul is another rural man of limited means, just trying to get by with retirement either getting the better of him, or already getting the better of him. He expected Will to haggle a bit - his nostalgia for the boat is tempered by sensible need for money, and it really *is* dated.

“Yeah,” Paul sighs, offers up his hand, relief and something somber in his tone. “Yeah, that sounds like a good deal to me. You sure?”

This can be a house of a sort - yes, he’s sure.

Paul eventually agrees for Will to lease the dock from him until the end of its current contract. (*You prefer to keep your name off of any documents other than the vessel’s registration and title. Probably no one is looking for you, but probably isn’t the kind of assurance you require.*) It’s not unusual for people to live aboard their ships, but a casual 30 foot boat is definitely a tight fit even for a single man. “Looking for something more permanent to stay in on the shore, of course,” Will adds. “But better a boat than another night in a no-tell motel, right?”

Paul seems relieved when they go to the bank and Will can honestly arrange a wire transfer, that the whole thing is for real. He laughs in surprise when Will is able to produce his Virginia boating license when talking to the marina office. Everything is on the up-and-up, cash offer and all. Will can feel Paul's little but natural reticence melt away with bigger laughs.

But Paul doesn't really want to socialize, and Will doesn't really want to either. They shake at the end of the afternoon, trade phone numbers, and part. Will reckons he's something of an absentee landlord until he finds something in town that's more stable. He recommends places to eat and to fish. Tells him when the harbormaster does inspections, and things to watch out for. (*"Mostly sea lions though," Paul huffs. "You'll want something to keep 'em off. Damn idiots. Don't know what they would think of a dog.* ")

"Well what do you think?" he says, turning to the dogs once he's carried their mounds of blankets in, and ensured little snouts can't sneak out of the cabin, or sea lions sneak into it. "Isn't she a beaut?"

Winston and Buster watch him, unimpressed, but happy to not be in the car.

There's a special on avocados.

Standing in the produce section of the grocery store, Will is somewhat adrift. Logically it follows: the boat has a kitchen, no matter how tiny and shitty it is, so Will cooks on the boat. After days upon days of gas station hot dogs, greasy spoon diners, protein bars (***now with 20g of protein!*** *they cheerfully tout*), and pre-packaged sandwiches, he feels like he should cook. That's what normal people with normal small town lives do, people that don't have to fly halfway across the country to go admire chalk outlines and surveillance footage and can't be bothered to make anything that can't be grabbed on the go. Astoria is a new place, and new habits are called for.

Alas, Poor Yorick , he thinks, an avocado in either hand. A bright yellow sign points downward to the pile of shiny fruits, rippled like disturbed waters. Beneath that, a fleshy

interior, pale green and adipose-sticky that browns when exposed to the open air. A big brown pit lies in the center, a blastoma of growth.

Will can't even think about avocado toasts without thinking of decay, and raises one fruit up to look for bruises in a cold case spotlight. *A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy* , he finishes the line.

Astoria, for all that it's a bream-soaked town on the edge of the river, is surprisingly hip. He could probably go without ever cooking for himself. Oysters, whelks, charcuterie, hot chicken sandwiches, with trendy sans-serif logos and cute phrases luring people in off the street. Portland apparently can't keep its weirdness contained, and it spreads up and down the waterways to vacation homes, weekend getaways, cabins used by relatives and short-term renters. There's two distillers, three breweries within walking distance of the docks, another five or so fancy cocktail bars. European and Scandinavian preserves next to smoked salmon and trout houses. It's decidedly metropolitan in its food tastes even as small mom and pop shops hold down the fort for locals that can't spend like that every day.

The grocery store is nearly homogenous in its similarities to the one back in Wolf Trap with tidy aisles and familiar household brands that don't challenge his sense of taste much. There's more seafood, more cured meats and cheeses, maybe less gluten free and diet conscientious advertising, but otherwise, he could be in any grocery store anywhere in the United States. Will can choose to not change this part of him that fears haute cuisine and aggressive flavors that he's not sure he can even appreciate anymore. He can fall back on Wonder bread instead of pain du chocolat, on Hormel chili instead of paella with land proteins and calasparra instead of bomba rice. (*"A quick-stepped rabbit that panicked in the face of escape," says Hannibal, with the inscrutable placid smile and the vivid dark eyes. "A small amount, just enough to highlight the venison. You'll like it with the Rioja."*)

Roasted Chicken, $6.99 , says a sign. It's been in the case since noon.

Will takes it back to the boat for a dollar discount, met with grateful dogs who eat it with a can of wet food. Will's wet food is a bottle of Jack Daniels today.

He eats his own share with his fingers straight out of the plastic carton, a side of mashed potatoes with a disposable spoon sticking straight up in them. The lights in the cabin of the boat are pleasantly yellow and dim, giving their new temporary home a shuttered warmth against the grey night, and the rocking of the boat. The blankets from the car have migrated

onto the long bench and raised bed of the cabin, a place for him and a place for Winston and Buster. He's dead tired, and keeps his hands away from the bourbon this time, thinking of having bottled water and medication to send him off to bed this time.

Success, he thinks. *Mature decision making complete. Look at me, a functioning adult.*

The gentle motion of the boat is less disruptive than he thought it would be, almost a relief after learning to accept the malaise of the pharmaceuticals. Now there's a clear reason to feel rocked back and forth. His literal safe boat on the water.

Will counts squares and patterns in the quilt over him, and closes his eyes. He thinks of the stag, quiet beyond the hills of the city - perhaps here it can't find him, unable to tread into the street lights.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" asks the cashier at the marina supply store.

"With boats? Yes," says Will.

(*With yourself and other people? No.*)

"Alright, well I know a guy when you need some help. Name's Frank."

"When, not if?" asks Will, smiling. He takes his shipping box of miscellaneous replacement parts, and an expensive new onboard navigation computer. He's a little unclear if the electrical on the ship can support it, but lord knows the old one needs to be replaced. The sandbars of the Columbia River are legendary, and the rivers where he prefers to fish have changed over the years.

The cashier laughs. “Well, we’ll see. You seem a little young for Paul’s old weekend fleabag, Daisy.”

Will admits he does have to text Beau for a few things, sending photos of the interior guts of the boat. (*“Daisy,” you tell him when you chat on the phone briefly about it. “A daisy if you do, like Doc Holliday.” Your daddy laughs - that’s a reference he gets for once.*) There’s a rat’s nest and all kinds of problems hidden under the plywood. Turns out it’s a bit more complicated to retrofit than Will’s provincial knowledge of 20 years back can handle. He’s an engine guy, not an electrician. Beau, who’s handled more ships that meaningful conversations in his life, is tickled about it, as much as Beau ever is.

Find the biggest disaster at the dock and buy it, texts Beau. ***That will be the best kind of project.***

Well I did, replies Will. ***That’s why I’m asking you.***

You don't need me. The fixin is the best part right now. You’ll hate it when you’ve got it figured out.

Will rolls his eyes, and shocks himself again. When he gets tired of the electronics, he tries his best to steam clean the rug and cushions with a rental machine from the grocery store, but they stay damp overnight. He drifts to sleep with the windows open despite the drizzle to fight off the wet fabric and wet dog smell.

The next time Will goes to the marina supply, he’s very proud to show off his new somewhat seaworthy vessel - he’ll probably drown if he tries to go through the Columbia River Bar out to open water before having the bottom of it resurfaced, but this will at least get him back in the shoals and fishing waters. The cashier is so impressed he puts him in contact with his guy, Frank, anyway.

“You got some free time and need some money?” asks the shopkeep, and boy, does Will ever.

Frank is an old salty sailor with a dislike for youths, but a need for a competent assistant during the late winter and early spring weather when the locals and out-of-towners start preparing for temperate weather again and pulling their ships and schooners out of the dry docks. When Will walks into his repair shop on the edges of the Lewis and Clark River after pulling up in Daisy, Frank gives him an eye, working a gasket in his hands with an oiled cloth.

“You need to cut your hair.”

“Probably,” says Will, with no intention of doing anything about it.

They’ve talked on the phone briefly before this, and Will thought he had a pretty good idea of what he was working with. Older man who should retire - can’t retire. Irritable, a little bit stiff in his legs, heavy set. His profile is unsurprisingly complete, save for one detail - a big fat ginger-haired cat named Scow that follows Frank around. Will has always had a preference for dogs, but Scow is surprisingly affectionate even if he is rough-looking. He weaves between the two of them, chirping.

“Garbage in, garbage out,” says Frank, putting generic canned tuna down for the big feline, but he smiles at him, and scratches the back of Scow’s ears. His smile fades when he looks back up at Will. “I like my shop, my cat, and my lunch at 11:30. You don’t do anything to mess those things up, and we’ll get along fine.”

“Sounds fair,” says Will. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Cleaning up the stockroom, I think, and then I’ll take you out to one of my own boats I’m working on,” Frank says. “Hope you’re not the type to offend easy. Best start simple, make sure you know your stuff. I like what’cha done on your Daisy out there, but we do all kinds here.”

(*You've always been surprisingly adept under pressure - you're happy this time engine repair is your talent, not understanding the best way to kill someone, or the array of splatter from arterial spray* .)

Will thinks he can be happy with this.

He takes himself out drinking for the first time since Hood River. A treat for himself, now that there's money coming into his bank account regularly. It's not a lot, but it's enough to justify a snifter of something expensive that will keep him from overdoing it this time.

The town's only whiskey bar is small, but attractive, hidden behind a porthole galley door with green tiles and shelves rising up in the front and low-lit bulbs that hang close to the counter that feel warm like bedside lamps. A large velvet sofa and leather arm chairs are a retreat in the dark corner away from the bar. An elk stag's head sits high above it all, mounted above the beams. Someone's put a bow tie on it. (*It lacks the wicked look of* ***your*** *stag, so you sit delicately underneath it.*)

There's hundreds of bottles to choose from when he sits down, from pretty much everywhere capable of producing scotch and whiskey.

He drinks cognac. Maybe it will taste different that he remembers, but it's the exact warm sweet burn here as it is in Baltimore. He faces his seat directly in front of the other vacant leather armchair. It's accusatory in its emptiness.

He drains the glass, and doesn't go back for a while.

As the first three weeks pass, there are some things that begin to annoy Will about living on a boat.

Primary amongst these is that taking showers in the aquatics center downtown starts feeling weird, no matter that he has a membership and tries to regularly swim to make it look *less* weird. He's not really perceived as a threat, but with the center being heavily frequented by children, parents give him the occasional askance looks. It would be nice to bathe the dogs at some point as well, who he studiously combs but has to admit are looking a bit brown of fur around their feet. Will's never been embarrassed to use a laundromat before, but there's only so many times he can wash the blankets and small selection of clothes that he has before even he has to admit he smells a bit dog-like himself.

The next is that he hasn't had much time to get new fishing gear that's appropriate, but there's not really much room for that either in a 30 foot boat. Will subsists on sloppy joes and eggs cooked to sticky hardness - he's not supposed to eat anything that could carry bacteria while he takes his pills, but he really wants a trout or a walleye. (*You'll miserably cook it until its flavorless and safe, just as the doctor ordered, so long as you get to catch it yourself.*) He's happy that he can take his little home on the water to work instead of his car and keep the dogs with him, but other than that, he hasn't been able to make use of Daisy like he normally would.

The final and probably more aggravating thing is that Frank's front desk assistant, the local police department, and his doctor's office all take umbrage with his lack of official mailing address. (*"No, the shop doesn't count," says Frank, giving you what you've started to refer to as 'the eye'* .)

Dr. Schroeder's office eventually comes around on it when they realize he's going to run out of a stability-preserving medication, but insist they can only do it this one time, and that he has to find a local clinic to do lab work at. He agrees. Seeing how terrible the clozapine and immunosuppressants make him feel normally, he doesn't really want to see what happens if he goes cold turkey.

He doesn't like the outside assumptions, that he's a vagrant, that he's unproductive or not helpful. (*Arguably, it's why you have never turned away an opportunity to work with the Behavioral Sciences Unit directly - you're saving lives, right?*) Not counting the spectacularly bad winter and fall preceding his move, Will has never been unemployed for more than a week or two. He keeps a clean home, tries to pretend to be the best unexceptional white male in his late 30s that he can be.

Setting up at the cafe with his laptop, he looks for another disaster project, like Daisy. There's something to be said for the quiet happiness he feels every time something is fixed, another broken piece restored. There's not much he can do to fix himself, but the boat? There's plenty there. If anything, he can admit that the boat has become an ersatz dog at this point - he's not quite ready to crowd Buster, Winston, and himself with another stray yet.

A short sale for a short sale seems appropriate, and he finds his disaster quite easily and close to the boatyard. A few blocks up from the highway crossing through the old downtown, the old Victorian cottages and estates of Astoria sprinkle the hillside, some in immaculate color, the painted ladies of old. All of them have stood since well before the first World War.

But Will's choice of house?

It's a meager two bedroom cottage built in the 1890s, one bathroom home with peeling white paint, with balconies and raised porches that strike him as a comfortable place to take in the mornings and evenings, assuming the posts aren't rotten. Honestly, it looks like someone was murdered there, a stripped and sodden basement taking the unfortunate center stage. He feels a kinship with it - it has good bones, and a homeliness to it that is endearing. The Astoria-Megler Bridge peeks through its windows, and while the kitchen isn't going to win any awards in its current state and he's pretty sure that there's bound to be some bad feng shui in its strange two story cramped spaces, he kind of loves his old dysfunctional white house.

"I hear flipping houses is all the rage," says Will on closing day, taking keys from the previous owner's agent.

The white house is a series of campaigns, taken day by day from walks to and from the docks. The campaigns share a common goal - having the house serviceable enough to move into with an air mattress so the dogs have the yard, and Will can finally fill out the correct office employment paperwork. It will not be pretty before then, and probably not for several months thereafter. He anticipates this, but the reality is much more taxing. He hasn't truly laboured hard since being sick, and manual labor is definitely hard.

The war begins like this:

Much like the sale of his own home, the hillside cottage is a quick purchase, completed without fuss. Even without the proceeds of the Wolf Trap house, Will has been a prolific money saver, and can easily buy the property without needing banks to give him the runaround. He notes with amusement that his extra twenty-five thousand dollars from the heavy-handed private buyer are exactly what he needs to beat most other earnest money deposits for the house in Astoria.

After the close of escrow, two weeks later, Will is ready for sweat equity, telling Frank that he'll need a few days. Frank is unimpressed - "I ain't paying you for those days," he says, and Will rolls his eyes, like he didn't know that already. "Need you that next Monday though - Coast Guard is recommissioning some old boats, said we get to work on four of 'em."

On day one, he goes into the house armed with a face mask, a sledgehammer, and an open mind about what he's going to find. Unlike the Wolf Trap house, this home is old - old enough to have some really interesting problems to solve. The basement on a second visit alone looks like something from Jack's Museum of Evil Minds, and Will suspects Freddie Lounds would have an absolute field day with that.

He throws out trash, donates furniture left behind, tests wall switches and appliances. Most of them are shit - this is all according to the plan. It's not ready for people to live in it tonight, so Will returns to the boat after taking a shower in the house. It has brown tile and a raised tub that would be at home in a grungy New Orleans hostel. The water is the coldest he thinks he's ever bathed in. So the water heater needs work too.

On day two, he wires the house for high speed internet, tearing out drywall and running fiber like a maniac between studs. The local internet company wants to do it for him, but Will only has a week, so as long as there's a co-axial that can be hooked up, he can make it a short appointment instead of a goddamn circus. He sweats like a devil, pausing periodically to slow his heart. He still struggles with his limitations after being ill, even after all the time that has passed.

When the internet company comes to connect the lines from the house to their hub on the neighborhood hillside, they somehow manage to make what should be the shortest part of the process take the longest. It's 8 pm by the time he sees a spark of life in the router, and Will is tired, irritable, and done pretending to be social.

He takes another icy shower, and goes back to the boat. Winston and Buster snort at him and curl up in a corner far away from his overripe work clothes.

On day three, he tears linoleum out of the foyer and living room, revealing old growth wood floors beneath. It's probably the most valuable thing in the house. It's also probably going to be the hardest thing to clean out of everything up to this point.

He gets out a belt sander that he borrows from work, stocks up on sandpaper from the Ace Hardware, and gets to work. He doesn't achieve much else, other than annoying the dogs again with the constant grinding of the floors.

There's a certain perversity in having the house wired for internet before he's so much as placed a single piece of furniture, or repaired a single sheet of drywall. When the sun goes down for the night on day three of his home improvement tour of duty, and all he has to see by is the brass candelabra chandelier in the living room, he pulls a wooden spindle chair that he thrifted from the Goodwill to the center of the room. It stirs up wood dust from his day's labor, while he boots up his laptop and the dogs eat dinner from their bowls in the kitchen. Five bars of signal shine out from the bottom corner of the screen, and Will has to fight some small pride he has - it's some kind of permanent improvement, the first of its kind.

He pours himself a glass of whiskey in the kitchen - Crown Royal from a small jam jar he finds tucked away in the cabinets. (*You need a return to older roots.*) There's a cartoon print of strawberries all along the outside, cheerful and pink and green. He leaves the door to the yard open for the dogs to romp outside.

His email account has grown more infested with emails the longer he waits between these checks. The new blistering speed of the internet in comparison to the local library and motels and diners past makes him feel like just clearing the inbox without looking and starting fresh, just to see how quickly it can be done, but there's enough in there that he feels the need to look at. It's against his better judgement. He's let it sit too long - at least two months. April is creeping into May. The cherry blossoms in Arlington will have bloomed by now.

Hannibal comes up at the end of all the emails, old now, but it had been new just days after his last interaction with his own medical doctor. (*You* really *should check this account more*

often.) For Hannibal, that's practically obsessive. Impatient. He saves it - he needs to see some humor first in all this content before he dives into that particular nest of vipers.

His most loathed and most favorite email of the evening is both unexpected and deeply irritating. A classic case of speaking of the devil, and they shall appear. He nearly drags it to the trash for fear of it tainting the entire inbox with garbage.

From: admin@tattlecrime.com

To: wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org

BCC: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

FW: A little birdy told me…

That you sold your house, left the FBI on medical sabbatical, and have gone AWOL, Graham. I've even got Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom asking if I've seen you. (I know, I laughed too. All those special times we've had together.)

I'm going to get more into that, I promise you, but as they say, things to do, people to see.

There's a lot of interesting developments here at home, Will. Since you're not here to hear about it, thought you might need to get brought up to date. Did you know Chilton is the Chesapeake Ripper? And that Miriam Lass is a surprisingly good shot? I figured you wouldn't be able to keep your mouth shut about it, after all that time you spent harping on Lecter, who's looking pretty squeaky clean these days. Penny for your thoughts?

Toodles.

Will actually laughs out loud. (*Can't she even write good emails? God, you hate her.*) He suspected that there might be a frame job starting to shape up, but Frederick Chilton? (*You warned him - you did, you tell yourself.*) And she'll get more into his living situation later? It's almost reassuring. If Freddie hasn't ferreted it out yet, then there's a good chance she won't. Not enough of a paper trail, and she's desperate enough to actually think Will would reply. Even Freddie can't know to look in the Oregon title lists for his new home, and that's the only thing he can think of that even remotely comes back on him.

He has wondered a couple of times if she'll be the first to figure him out - she has an honest obsession and dislike for him built in their mutual disrespect. Any time he sees a red-head on the street, he feels the bottom of his stomach drop out. Freddie Lounds, a flaming haired Rumpelstiltskin, here to take the dross and spin it into digital gold comment threads. She just can't leave him alone, no matter how ridiculous. Anything for a click. Dearest readers, what shade of jumpsuit is Will Graham wearing today? Do you think he was sexually creeping on Abigail Hobbes before he went all Mike Tyson on her? Do you think he's personally responsible for the disappearance of Jon Benet Ramsey? Can we pin Amelia Earhart on him? How long until he starts his own cult like some sort of murder Nostradamus?

(*This is somewhat unfair - Freddie knows you're usually right, and that's why she actually dislikes you, like you're hoarding a commodity. Murder as a shareholder.*)

What *would* Will do if Freddie showed up? He thinks of the convenient pit in the bottom of his house, and takes a swig of whiskey. He'd have to dig it deeper, of course, but wouldn't that be great - under a house, unremarkable and unremarked on. Dug up in 30 or 40 years, when Will very probably will be dead by someone's hand or his own. (*You've never had any doubts about that.*) She would hate it. The thought cheers his stony, pharmaceutically induced palpitating heart.

He deletes it and moves on.

There's some from colleagues - co-authored papers, asking for grant writing assistance, asking if he has teaching materials they can borrow since it seems like he won't be back for a while. These too he deletes.

A notable drop in emails from Jack this time, stopping a couple weeks ago. Shining a day after they stop is a notice from the academy's human resources department. Per Kade Purnell and federal employee guidelines, Will is not to speak to staff in a professional capacity without ending his sabbatical leave and making a formal return to his duties at the academy. He is subject to a new clinical evaluation to consult. (*You will fail it by design - Kade will make sure of it.*) He cannot consult by proxy or in absentia, he cannot look at collateral from case files, and he cannot operate in the capacity of a federal agent.

Well that all sounds pretty wonderful, even if there is a disappointment gnawing something in him. Not consulting by choice instead of by no option feels more significant, but like Lawrence and his creamer, maybe removing the temptation is best.

Will refills his glass, feeling warm, and salutes Kade Purnell, the sole harbinger of lawsuit avoidance. He thinks about how she handles meetings with the wrongful imprisonment lawyer, who is absolutely going to get some kind of settlement - the press relations at the FBI would rather die than having him back in the news in relation to them. Good old Kade Purnell, telling him to rot while alive or rot while dead. What he wouldn't give to drive the heel of one of her shoes into her eye socket.

(*Now* there's *an honest thought, you hateful thing.*)

Eventually, he has to cycle back to Hannibal's email, sitting like a basket with cobras inside, and not a snake tamer in sight. He takes a long drink, hovers over the 'Mark as Read' button. He's not sure why he can't just delete it.

It's dated not very long after his first night in Astoria. He likes to think he's chowing down on the foulest to-go tacos and feeling good about himself in his moldy boat while Hannibal is composing this letter. They say the best revenge is a life well lived.

Will suspects Hannibal knows now that he reads his emails after all. Doctor Schroeder will have seen to that accidentally. It's completely unsurprising to see her name come up in a quick scan. It's more surprising to see Hannibal try to reassert that he is a physician after all.

It warms Will's heart, but less joyfully and more like heartburn. He is seething by the end of it.

From: ***hlecter@johnshopkins.edu***

To: ***wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org***

BCC: ***52hertzgraham@gmail.com***

FW: A word of caution

It seems that I have overstepped my bounds with Dr. Schroeder, and in turn with your medical consent. You'll be most pleased to hear she has filed a misconduct report on your behalf - a second generation German with the most stringent of adherence to the rules. I consider myself most chastised following our conversation today.

I would give you the usual assurances that I only have your best interests in mind, but as we've seen time and again, I don't think that holds much value to you any longer. It does, however, appear that these messages make their way to you one way or another, and so I must push on.

A word of caution. You are currently taking a truly monstrous cocktail of drugs that will render your immune response to illness down to almost nothing. Your usual diet of convenience store refuse without nutritional content will leave you vulnerable. You now get to be part of a very ungratifying statistic of people that succumb to pedestrian illnesses like the flu or complications from the common cold. Please take some vitamins, and avoid major thoroughfares with people. If you haven't been sick yet - well, that's just temporary good fortune.

Halfway through the letter, Will can't tell if he's trying to belittle his susceptibility to illness or threaten him with rhinovirus. Trust Hannibal to make complications from the common cold sound like eating dinner with the salad fork, but there's more.

More to the point, I would not recommend clozapine for you. An atypical mind doesn't mean you require an atypical drug. How dull and sick you must feel - you're not some garden variety schizophrenic, no matter your recent history of sleepwalking and nightmares.

If you take no other advice from me, then take this - do not drink if you insist on continuing. Do not ignore feelings of confusion, unbalance, or being tongue tied without reason.

I hate to see your brilliant mind squandered on so feeble a diagnostic treatment.

For once, Will can feel Hannibal's frustration rippling the surface. Hannibal doesn't like to be corrected, and Hannibal doesn't like to be wrong. *Well, tough shit,* thinks Will. How *squandered* he felt, between MRIs, blood transfusions, fevers, ice baths. How *wasted* the sleepless nights, the hunted feeling, the constant fear that he's finally done something irrevocably terrible. That is Hannibal's legacy - a descent into madness by encouraging his brain to destroy itself *to see what would happen.*

He grabs the bottle from near the legs of his spindle chair, and pours another round for himself. *To my health,* he thinks, throwing back the alcohol.

He is violently sick that night - half a bottle of Crown Royal, delivered in small doses, is still half a bottle. Will heart pounds in his chest, and he feels watery and weak in a way that he hasn't since his last extended stay at the hospital. He actually wonders if he *should* go to the hospital, and if the dogs will eat him if he does manage to die that night on the boat.

He's only had a few people care for him in his entire life - his father, a landlady in New Orleans, an older cousin, most recently Hannibal. The comfort he took in that is gone. There's nothing believable behind it.

Two truths, and a lie.

(*Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown, you recite.*)

From outside the fogged windows of the cabin, the sounds of hooves on the docks.

With the harbor wakes rocking of the boat and another missed round of drugs, he's not sure when morning comes or if he's slept, only that eventually the dogs start to nose him, quiet in their concern. He has tumbled down the paths of his mind, hollows of anxiety.

“Bring me some aspirin,” Will says in a rasping tone, stroking Winston’s coat. “You’re a smart dog, you know what the bottle looks like.” His hands are shaking violently, even after multiple rounds of water.

He’ll take it easier next time. Will has always held his drinks well, and he’s not going to let Hannibal get the last say, a word of caution or not.

Day four slips away in a miserable pile on the boat, where he has just enough energy to get up and take the dogs on a quick walk. He doesn’t go back to the white house for the duration. There's only a few days left for Will to work on his new house before recurring obligations come calling again, so he fortifies himself with sleep and sips of water.

The war against the house continues like this:

Day five dawns early, a haggard white faced Will dragging himself and the dogs up the hill from the harbor, huffing and puffing along the sidewalk. His heart races, and for half a moment Will wonders if maybe he’s experiencing his first cardiac event.

So where do I have them send my body? he texts Beau. ***I think I pickled myself the other night. Nothing worth keeping left.***

Pickles are what you want, says Beau. ***Lots of salt. Fuck low sodium diets.***

And fuck vitamins and avoiding high population thoroughfares while I’m at it , thinks Will. He drives to the town of Seaside for plumbing supplies and new drywall. He sweeps up the dust of the living room floor, and rips up carpet from the master bedroom. More floors to sand and polish beneath, more aching limbs and shaky breaks to drink water and walk himself to the diner down the hill off the highway. He brings the dogs slices of bacon, and neglects to eat much of a side salad that he had conned himself into ordering. (*Nutrition, not the usual refuse* .)

He opens the window despite the drizzly day, watching the bridge occasionally peek through the window and the large Sitka spruce just on the edge of the front yard. He thinks of sleeping here, so close to his boat, so close to the edge of the world.

Day seven is the last before a return to work. After a week of generally feeling over-extended, Will has to admit he's relieved to go back to the shipyard for more straight-forward problems. They belong to other people, whereas the house is one continuous problem for himself. The bathroom is functional though, and he's probably only a week from making fully moving in work, even with his substantial laundry list of things to make better.

He doesn't buy anything to clean up the basement, other than cement mix. He jokes to himself that he's keeping his options open on what to do with it.

The allure of the shiny modern router, so alien in his old home, drives him back to his computer eventually. He finds himself researching old articles and home improvement methods for historical houses. He's not pretentious enough to think he's doing something accurate to the time period, but knowing how best to not to fuck up the chair railing made from old growth oak wood along the edges of the fireplace and living room would probably behoove him. (*You save the flue for another day - something about the ashy darkness of the chimney makes you uncomfortable.*) The dogs are milling around his feet, looking for somewhere comfortable to bed down until time to go back to the boat.

Will orders light fixtures, special wood putties, and brass knobs for the doors. He researches paint best suited to restoring the deck that faces the north, a raised platform that reminds him of the narrow plantation verandas in Louisiana. An air mattress, highly rated on Amazon, will be here mid next week.

He checks his inbox for purchase confirmations. Everything is mundane, just a Sunday night before the work week. He wants a beer, but he's not sure even three days later than his liver is ready for it.

In the time he's finished clearing the inbox, he notices a new item, relegated to the spam folder. It sits, a stark **(1)** from the folders menu, arrived 20 minutes ago, between bouts of shopping for Victorian appropriate hardware, and doesn't that just sound ridiculous? Nigerian

princes and publisher's clearing house scams await, surely. Digital crime never rests and doesn't discriminate.

The sender, however, differs from the usual affair. For one, it's not a forwarded message. Other than the real estate agents he's spoken with and the estate and criminal attorneys, he doesn't know who could even have gotten this email. He's not in the habit of signing up for mailing lists, giveaways, or rewards programs. The subject line doesn't really align with his online shopping tonight, but stranger things have happened.

Virgil Maro - Subject: On the Subject of Wandering Albatrosses

Intrigued, he clicks it. *No link-clicking though,* he thinks with a twist of his mouth. *I'm probably mentally ill, but not a moron.*

From: "Virgil Maro" onacheronsshore@protonmail.com

To: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

Subject: On the Subject of Wandering Albatrosses

Dear Will,

Let's have a bit of honesty between us, albeit through dishonest means. Should that frustrate you, I must say that you are the one who set the ground rules.

Will looks up. To his own admittance, he's not a moron. Of course it's Hannibal. Who else would have both the gall and the literary background for that kind of pseudonym? How he's found his way around to Will's forwarding address is the question of the hour. He's casting a line, and waiting for bites.

(*You're biting.*)

You seem to be in a pelagic state of mind these days. I happened upon a conversation that made me think especially of you. I have an elderly woman for a client that is particularly taken with birds, a wealthy donor to the Audubon Society and general advocate for the Piping Plover along the Maryland coast. She is quite quixotic - I suspect you would find her either exhausting or very enjoyable. She has a particular way of riding roughshod over conversations with her enthusiasm. A forgivable trait in passionate people.

She's had the pleasure of visiting New Zealand recently, a pursuit that a bird watcher like herself would enjoy. Along the coast there and in the reaches of Oceania, there is a particularly unusual bird that is hard to miss, should you happen across it. One of the largest in fact - the Wandering Albatross. She had the good fortune of an encounter, and found it very gratifying. She was very enamoured of it, and I in turn found myself wanting to sneak a peek. I ended up opting to do a little light reading on it myself, as I only know a small amount, and mostly through poetry. You are familiar with the The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, I would guess. Its timbre is very like yours at times.

The Wandering Albatross, Diomedea exulans. Exulans for "wanderer", or "exile". The sailors of ancient times thought to kill an albatross was extraordinarily bad luck, admiring of their skill following ships. They spend the majority of their life on the sea, truthfully more efficient gliding over the water than on land. Capable of circumnavigation, growing more pearly white with age. The longest wingspan of any avian creature living to stay away from the hurts of dry land.

Thousands upon thousands of miles wandered, and no real home save the sea.

How is the sea air treating you these days, Will?

Will closes the laptop. He doesn't delete the missive, as is his routine. The white noise of an empty house surrounds him. Hannibal Lecter can't actually know where he's at - if Beau Graham doesn't know where to send a postcard, then nobody else does either.

He is, however, counting cards, plucking an ace from a deck of 52. Will has often thought Hannibal would be a killer at gambling, amongst other things.

(*Who else could render you down so quickly, jointing you like livestock? What a merciless skill.*)

With a lifetime of shrewd observations, admittances of short-comings, and few social connections, Will understands the point. Hannibal the reductionist, walking the earth like it is his sole calling to let the mere mortals know the reality of their existence in the most convoluted of parallels, and Will has only waited for him to speak and reveal his truth.

It's really not so surprising that the man switches from surgery to psychiatry when Will *really* let's himself think about it - dominion over someone's self perception is so much more impactful than dominion over kidney failure, of hemorrhaging from injuries from car crashes, strokes, myocardial infarctions, accidents, random acts of God. (*"God's terrific," says Hannibal, and you, uncomfortable, pace the mezzanine. "He dropped a church roof on 34 of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas while they sang at him."*)

But even with his anxious anger and no small amount of surprise, Will misses Hannibal, and how easily he can deduce him.

Will misses the illusion of consistency and certainty he represented, the exacting words that Will can jump from subject to subject to and not worry about being misunderstood. Thinking of seabirds even now, he feels scarred by absence, tasting and seeing nothing. It's unfair that his anger can't carry him over this wave. He wants so badly to be carried over. He wants to drift out of caring about this anymore, adopt someone else's skin that doesn't feel like he does.

He replies. Topical literature for topical literature, he thinks. He does know the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, though he thinks now more of the sacrilegious sailor of the story than the bird proffered to him. It's not really an answer to Hannibal's question, but for a searing moment he wants to be recognized. To have Hannibal brought before the crew, burdened.

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks had I from old and young!

Instead of the cross, the Albatross about my neck was hung.

He clicks send.

Maybe he is a moron after all.

There's no reply. Will's disappointed to realize he wanted one, and then spends the rest of the week pretending that's not true, and that he hasn't added the email application to his phone, refreshing periodically throughout.

"Put your damn phone away," Frank says.

And Will does.

act 2 - and he can no longer exist

Three months into living in Astoria, Will has to admit that his hair has gotten too long.

He's always had curly hair that grows in big lazy rings, clinging to his neck and shoulders. His father's own hair is board straight and coarse, so Will takes it to be the only thing he has of his mother other than the old salt shakers and a few letters. (*You had a picture once - not of her, just her parents' house.*) He hated it initially - begged his daddy to take him to the barber shop to shear it off. He looks vulnerable with it cropped close to his head, a big bright eyed thing and no beard as a teen, but Will would rather had suffered a few insults than gather sad looks from his father. Now, in the oncoming spring after his purposeful neglect and limited access to grooming tools in Baltimore State, he can pull it back around his ears in a half-tail for work when needed. He usually lets it fall loose.

When he does rarely make his way to a barber, he doesn't let them touch his hair, though they do comb it back - he has them clip his beard and moustache until it is tidy and flush to his face, grown in but sparse still in places. The Spaniard, the coffee shop barista calls him instead of Will one day when calling out his order. El Conquistador. She flirts with him, and Will laughs awkwardly, but flattered.

He stops wearing his glasses. Will's hair can cover his eyes for him in most cases. (*You're thankful for the lion's mane you've grown that hides your wildness.*) He trades the khakis and button up shirts for wool pullovers and jeans, and waterproofed rain shells with knitted hats and socks. Utility begins to overtake academia. He is growing into the Oregon countryside.

"You look like my cousin Denise," says Frank. "I suppose next you're going to take up a degree in civil engineering that you never use and going to Vegas once a month too, huh?"

He ignores Frank's comments the majority of the time, who largely just calls him a damn hippie or other feminine epithets that roll off Will easily, but over time Frank has started introducing him to the older sailors in Astoria that go for beers on weeknights and grumble about being too sore the next day. Out of this motley crew of retirees, veterans, and stolid port workers, the nick names start getting more interesting.

If anything, he's keeping a list of the exotics he's started gathering. He never knows when he'll need a phrase for a new forwarding email address for his forwarding email address.

Offbrand John Frusciante is his current favorite, but White Trash Apollo has appeal. (*This one you get from the bartender at the local whiskey bar. "You've got a nice Greek face, but you always look strung out."*) An escapee of the Allman Brothers Band is also thrown around the brewery - tonight all of them drink overpriced beer, and consider themselves the cleverest of men.

The brewery is full of people tonight - something about a 'can release', which to Will sounds less like it's about pale ales and more like a SWAT operation, but if that's how it's done in Astoria amongst its younger and middle aged residents, then he will be here to improve his costume of normalcy. The brewery owners print flyers and novelty shirts, and sell the 4-packs of tallboys with bright smiles from drinking. People take pretentious phone pictures of their beer and their mustachioed faces. It's pleasant and warm, and Will can see the shoreline from the viewing windows placed all along the warehouse front. There's a gull standing on top of a light post outside, and Will thinks about its feet on the metal, how that must hurt, because he's had a few already.

Will is the youngest of the sailors troop, although a bright green eyed and ruddy-skinned man by the name of Russell likes to think of himself as an alcohol enthusiast. (*"Well of course I like to get drunk," says Russell, while everyone groans and you play at groaning. Your mask is well tended. "Getting drunk on the good shit is the difference between me and Frank."*)

"Come on now, how's Will ever going to get a girlfriend if you make fun of his hair all the time?" says Russell.

"I'd sleep with an Allman Brother," says another.

"I think most people would sleep with Will if he would shower more often," says a third.

(*In your defense, the water heater at the cottage is touch and go and you hate the little, cold bathroom. Besides, you have no one to impress except Frank, who can't be impressed by anything but the cat.*)

And they all laugh, and Will laughs, because that's the done thing. It doesn't matter that it's kind of awkward, and that Will only half likes these men on some days. He can absorb their easy contentment, and drink rum and beer after prying barnacles and rust from hulls, digging out the guts of old ships, following them in the evenings to the brewery, to the pub, to eat french fries late at night. As long as he can go home to let the dogs out into the yard and back in the house, it's fine. It's just like older days.

The shutters of cameras whine and click over by the bar, while he smiles with friends and looks to the counter with curiosity. He's always been wary of being photographed. It's almost always because there's a corpse.

(*This moment will be important, but not for the reasons you think.*)

Will changes his license plates on the Volvo from Virginia to Oregon. Frank tells him that's the sensible thing to do, and he accepts it like a gospel truth. The feeling of blending in begins almost immediately afterwards. There's so little of the old Will Graham except the actual Will Graham.

But Will Graham is feeling like he's got everyone fooled these days. He can't change what he is, but he can play at someone else with surprising accuracy. He's finally lied his way into being a regular Joe. He can't decide if it's good - being asked to hang out with the guys after work scratches an itch he has ignored since he was a child. Being a grease monkey that is invited to backyard grill parties (*even if politely declined*), is something Will never really thought about having.

On the other hand, Will is also a terrible liar for all that no one seems to be able to see it. He can act, he can sing, and he can't escape the shame of knowing that it's not really him, or alternatively becoming afraid of it becoming him. At what point does it go from game to reality? Is he a reflection of Frank's seaborn bachelor life? Do people like him because he is Will, or because the Will Graham of Astoria is able to recognize an uncomfortable comment from a comfortable lie, and laugh like the rest of them? (*Virginia and Maryland's Will Graham is biblical in his need to speak truth - how does that measure up for you these days, Will?*)

Life is comedy, and life is tragedy. Will wonders if Hannibal doesn't feel the same sometimes, wearing and switching masks like a practiced performer. Does a man like Hannibal Lecter feel the same creeping persistence of the artificialness of it?

Will thinks he revels in it.

Will tries his best to do the same.

Edmund Ferris is a hateful creature that Will interacts reluctantly with at work - a frequent client that lives in Warrenton and works for the State Fish & Game Department. He is a regular everywhere in Astoria that is old and decrepit. He fancies himself part of the old guard, with his worn hunter's gear and camoflauge. He hunts poachers, and hunts animals alike as a Game Warden.

Game Warden Ferris, the wildest asshole of the Pacific Northwest, thinks Will, watching the big man walk into the shop and mentally groaning. Game Warden Ferris, *always trying to measure his dick by the rifle he open carries as a right and as a message.*

Will has on occasion contemplated asking for a referral to the department, trying to make small talk as an accomplished fisherman, but Edmund is a proud small town man that has no room for people "like Will" in his work. Will doesn't quite know what to make of that. Will is just asking about fish - it's literally in the title of the organization.

Today, Edmund Ferris follows Will out to the docks, who has the singular joy of giving Ferris back the keys to one of the government trawlers. He is doggedly close, critical of the deck even in the rain. When it seems like there's nothing actually wrong with the boat (*even with you having to wipe the infinitesimal amount of mud from the back rail of the boat to make Ferris stop bitching and moaning*), Will is almost desperate to go back into the shop and hand him off to Frank for the purchase order and final invoice.

"You do much hunting, Graham?"

Will wipes his hands, and feels out an answer. The obvious answer is yes, but the political one is no. Of course Edmund Ferris isn't thinking of manhunts. "Not in the woods no, not for a long time." (*Liar.*) Will frowns a little, biting the inside of his cheek. "It's not my preference - I'm more of a fisherman."

Ferris spits on the dock, and grins a little. He really has a loathsome way about him sometimes. Arrogant. "One of the guys in town said you're quite the angler, probably should talk to you about a job with Fish and Game, but unless you want to work in the fishery tagging the bred fish, I don't know if it's the place for you. You have a kind of soft look to ya."

"It's probably the hair," says Will, starting to get impatient with the conversation. He'd like to be anywhere else - maybe arm deep in an oil tank. (*Or a chest cavity - just remember your gloves.*)

"Gotta be willing to put down an animal - 's'not like keeping dogs," continues Ferris, like Will didn't say anything. "You go into their home and kill them where they live."

"Is it possible to break and enter an elk's house? Isn't that just going into the forest? Do they not live in safe neighborhoods?" Will muses, and Frank snorts from the back office, audible even over the water and gentle misting rain against the service dock. Ferris looks like he's feeling like the butt of the joke, so Will clears his throat. "I've put down bigger animals than deer and coyotes," says Will. "I just don't go looking for something to put down that doesn't need it."

"Fortunately I get to make the calls on that, not you. Whole world of meat out there for a man who wants to catch it himself." He spits again. Will wonders if he'll need to powerwash the planks before he goes home tonight.

"Fortunately," Will deadpans, and hands the keys to the boat to him.

He really does hate Ferris when he comes in.

With the exception of assholes like Edmund Ferris, Will likes the people that come to Frank's shop. Practical fishermen, lean cut Coast Guard, families with a boat shared between them for joyriding, whale watching, whatever takes their fancy. People that live with little means but have guileless good humor about it. It makes him think of Beau and his buddies, when he bothered to bring them by as a kid. He likes the opportunity to mirror the simplicity of that. There's an older woman who lives in an old mobile home near the airport that brings her shorthaired pointer to socialize with Winston and Buster, while Scow watches hatefully from the office window. A younger couple with a small daughter trades fruit for the occasional quick repair from Frank, and Will and the accountant look the other way, or sneak cheap strawberry candies to the young girl. She has big dimples and dark curly hair like Will's.

Even playing pretend, he doesn't always feel like he fits in. For all that Will is a poor fisherman's son, he is heavily educated, well-read, and quickly associates with things that are beyond Frank and the Astoria crew's interests. References to Merriwether Lewis and taxonomy of fish falls flat. Quips of poetry unrecognized. Will would keep it to himself, but he's never really been able to keep his mouth shut, so instead he looks like some forlorn college graduate coming home to the country.

It's not that inaccurate. It's just also not quite like coming home.

It's highlighted today when some tourists from Cannon Beach come by with questions about the river mouth that the shop sits on, separate from the Columbia by the Youngs Bay Bridge, and brackish with reeds while the tide is out. They seem confident in their skills to navigate it, even with Frank and Will shaking their heads at the large boat they are taking up the waters. Sportsman fishing is on the agenda, and good advice isn't going to get in the way of fun.

Will doesn't take it personally. Type two fun, where the fun is actually the memorability of how difficult something is, is still fun for some people.

"If they think they're going to catch a sturgeon with a noisy-ass ride like that, it's gonna be a rough time," says Frank of one, after offering directions pointedly away from the mouth of the Lewis and Clark River over to Youngs instead. It's wider.

“I don’t see the appeal - they’re really ugly fish,” says the accountant. Her name is Lori, she wears bright red-orange lipstick that clashes with her bleach-blonde hair, and she keeps talon-like french tipped nails that Will finds distracting. They look like teeth, and she bites them when she’s nervous or bored. It’s a subconscious tic. It’s decidedly animal looking when she does it regardless.

Will shrugs, pushing hair out of his face as he works on the backside of a small fuse block. “Very valuable and very hard to catch,” says Will. “Sturgeon caviar isn’t as popular as it used to be, but it’s still a treat. And historically they’ve always been considered important. They used to use a collagen called isinglass in the medieval period that came from their bladder. You treat lambskin vellum with it.”

Frank snorts. “There you go again, Professor Graham.”

Will very nearly drops the fuse block, he flinches so hard at the title.

“Where do you even learn all this stuff?” asks Lori.

“I just read a lot,” Will grumbles. It’s true, even now. The first piece of furniture other than his spindle chair and an inflatable mattress is a book shelf. He’s re-reading The Canterbury Tales this month. Troilus and Criseyde - Criseyde is writing her letters to Diomede, seeking advice, destined to accept him as a lover.

(*Diomedea exulans, the Wandering Albatross is a large bird of the family* -)

‘Well that’s for sure,” she says. “You always have this old man and the sea thing going. You’re about half a head of grey hair away from starting to smoke tobacco and talk about bagging whales.”

Ernest Hemingway and Moby Dick don’t go together, but correcting her would be unkind. Will is a lot of things, but not that, at least not to people who don’t deserve it.

Will laughs. “Hopefully I never find myself that obsessed with fishing.”

“Must be hard, being the smartest guy in the room,” says Lori. “It must make you tired to have to explain yourself all the time. I get why you’re quiet most days.” She opens the window, and lights a cigarette. Frank doesn’t mind for the most part, and she has a habit. He’s joined her a few times before. “But putting on waders and a grease monkey outfit doesn’t make you different from what you are. Might as well let a duck be a duck.”

Will smiles with no feeling behind it. Being dressed down is awkward. It’s been so long since he’s had an equal conversation, and it feels spoiled to complain about it. He asked for simple, and now he has it.

While he’d like to think he’s unlucky, he’s actually had pretty good luck. He has his dogs, his house, his boat, and he has a functional job most days. Will is practically beaming with the promise of the American Dream, until his stint with luck runs out.

He gets a cold.

It is truly awful.

It starts simply - his nose begins to run, and soon he can’t breathe through it. Soon after, a hacking cough starts turning into a wet, choking thing. His chest is heavy, his eyes burn, and he thinks he might be starting to herniate from coughing so much. He can’t remember anything ever being this bad, even as a kid. He just gasps his way through going up and down the stairs, to the store, to work. Chills run through his like electric currents, and it’s so like having encephalitis for several moments, that he just about taps out and calls his dad to come sit with him.

Frank tells him to go home, thinking he has pneumonia. “I’m an old bastard and an old bastard knows when your lungs are shit. Can’t live as long as me with this much smoking without knowing. You go to urgent care and get some antibiotics and call me when you’re not a threat to yourself and others.”

Will rolls his eyes, and wheezes, but he agrees. Lori drives him to the clinic - neither of them in the office want him to try and take Daisy out again.

Turns out when he goes to urgent care, and the shiny little pulse oximeter takes his heart rate and oxygenation, maybe he's not doing well. A very nervous looking nurse practitioner brings him a little canister of oxygen, and walks him to a wheelchair to go next door to the hospital. He relieved it's such a short walk - he despises looking weak.

"Bacterial pneumonia, Mr. Graham," says the intake doctor. "You're going to have yourself a few days at the ICU. This is quite the list of medicines you take, and I don't think you'll beat it at home." Will's thankful he doesn't mention the mental health medication. Nobody knows about that except him, Doctor Schroeder, Doctor Hannibal Lecter (*we must mind the formalities*), and two pharmacists, long may they stay silent.

Lori, bless her, keeps the dogs and his house keys while he gets hooked up for his stay.

So Hannibal was right about at least one thing. Maybe something pedestrian like a cold or flu will take him out after all.

The second hardest part of the ICU is no one actually let's him sleep. There's always a nurse prodding him, or checking his IV fluids, or giggling with the other night nurse down the hall. There's not a lot of people in here, and Will's room is locked down like Fort Knox, the smell of Lysol and bleach permeating and a strip of glass in the wall for the hospital staff to look in on his like a zoo animal. "I really don't want to take any chances," says the resident nurse, an Indian woman with a round but kindly face. "You have the immune system of an infant."

"That's good, I feel like crying like an infant," he gasps from between breaths from the nasal cannula when she does an examination before the night shift begins.

“Stop talking, just deep breaths,” she instructs. Her name tag is shiny - Rana, with the dark hair and dark skin, and pleasant British English that rounds all her vowels until he starts thinking what she would sound like with a Southern accent.

The first hardest part is having to not take his medications, except the clozapine which is given in small doses so they can pump him full of antibiotics. He’s had so long to acclimate, and the fear of hallucinations starts turning into paranoia about it. He can hear the scratching of antlers on the ceiling tiles, and his daddy calling from down the hall. It’s unnerving.

Time crawls on, and Will tries to wade into the stream.

It’s something in the ballpark of 2 am, and all is quiet except the beeping of heart monitors, and walkie talkies from the nurse’s station. An older woman from Seaside is having a bad time with a stroke, and they are taking turns watching her. This leaves Will mostly undisturbed, but not unbothered. His last stay overnight for treatment that he can recall wasn’t solo - save for the occasional small gap, Alana, Beverly (*and god, it hurts to think of her*), and Hannibal had made every effort to make sure he had someone to speak for him instead of having the staff waking him. Quiet conversations. Small, nutritious meals, brought in warming bags.

A Silkie chicken in a broth with wolfberries and anise, probably the only meal Will’s ever provided devoid of human tissue from Hannibal. In this timeframe, Hannibal doesn’t want Will to recover yet, but he does want him to have a small moment to feel well. Will can be honest with himself about that - even for Hannibal, it wasn’t designed to all hurt. It was designed for him to not struggle.

With the window of his room drawn closed, curtains saturated with anti-bacterial spray, he has to focus on something, so he can focus on this.

It’s been four months since he came to Astoria. Almost five since he left Wolf Trap. For a person running on the immunity of a cancer patient, Will can privately admit that it truly has been good fortune that he’s not been more than just nauseated and weak-limbed during recovery. If he can shake the pneumonia, he could be done with the immunosuppressants and just be a regular raggedy crazy guy on meds, not infirm.

Other than the three emails he's received from Hannibal, there's been nothing more. He reads them from his phone, looking for his just anger, but just feeling short of breath and sad. No poking and prodding, no "tell me Will, "Hello, Will," and "Please have a seat, Will." Just a steady quiet, uninterrupted.

Does Hannibal Lecter get bored with things? Does he put them in the bottom of a chest, waiting to play with them again on another day, when he's forgotten he has them? This is what Will wanted so desperately after all, and nine-tenths of the time it's still what he wants. He's worked so hard to ensure he would be left alone.

But Will is alone, and lonely in the dark of the hospital, and the Hannibal he thinks he knew is the only real safety he's had while sick beyond caring for himself. Like an animal crawling under a house to die, Will fancies himself crawling under the floorboards of Hannibal's office like a dog, because it's *safe* there.

(*You can't look over that he's the one that made you sick, the kind that is still trying to kill you - but you want to. You want to so bad, to let him sink his fingers into your head, to the meninges and pink tissue beneath, and feel sheltered again.*)

From the swinging-arm bedside table, Will grabs his cell phone, and stares at the screen. The background image is a small blue columbine that is growing from a crack in his front yard walkway.

It will be 4 am in Maryland. If he is not going about his nightly activities, Hannibal Lecter will be asleep at home. Will doesn't know if he wants to know or not if Alana is still there. She hardly seems the type to have brief flings, and Hannibal doesn't seem the type to let a good foil go. Maybe he doesn't know Hannibal very well at all, and there's others. He's always been afraid to think too much of that kind of intimacy - it's hard for him even now.

He doesn't know what to expect. Will is gasping to death in a small hospital room by himself, and how much worse could this possibly be?

He dials Hannibal. No contact in his phone - he always remembers the numbers. His hands shake, and Will holds his breath, and tries to keep his heart from racing.

And it rings, and rings, and rings…

...And rings.

There's never any answer, and even after his release from the hospital almost a week of boredom and ceiling-gazing later, it never goes any further than that.

Whether he's relieved or saddened by it, Will couldn't tell you. He doesn't make his best decisions when he's ill, and he's beginning to think he might just be ill all the time, just in different ways.

He's been off some of the meds long enough that he's given a thumbs up from Doctor Schroeder's office to try going without. Without the immunosuppressants, he goes back to feeling mildly less shitty - he's told he can probably cook his steak and fish a little rarer, just give it a few weeks.

He doesn't waste any time on drinking, now that only one drug is going to try and kill him when he does. He buys two bottles of cognac - Russell recommends one that he's read about - as most things do in Will's life at this point, it too has a stag on it, sitting couchant in bold red. ***Hind*** , it says. Hind what? Hindsight? Hindquarters? Either way, he's amused by it, and tells Russell thank you for the recommendation.

The other is bought from a specialty store, an elaborate bottle that Will knows Hannibal had in his drawing room. A very pretty rounded glass cushion shape, and a javelin throwing centaur gold-foiled in delicate detail to finish the deal. It's very Hannibal. It's also very good.

The Canterbury Tales continue, and he, soaking up the affection of his dogs that have missed him and the spirits in his inherited jam glass, sleeps fairly soundly on the air mattress. He's a little cold, but it's nothing he won't throw one of their one million thrifted quilts on himself to solve.

Some trust-fund kid with his shiny Rolex and stylish leather shoes won't leave Lori alone.

"Come on honey, let me buy you a drink." His teeth are very straight and white - veneers no doubt. What the fuck is he doing in Astoria?

They've opted for a dive bar after work, something that's more Frank's speed over the shiny metal and stills of the breweries. While Lori isn't a great beauty, she is still a woman of pleasant attractiveness, big breasts, and loud lipstick. She doesn't look old, just worn at the edges. He would guess it's the lipstick that draws this kind of guy in, but as far as he's concerned she can wear whatever she wants. The guy is the one with the problem.

"Not interested, baby," she says, clawed fingers wrapped around a new cigarette. "I'm at least as old as your mom."

"My mom's tits don't look half as nice as yours. Let's get a drink, you can tell me what's fun to do around here." His friends are laughing in the background. "We can go somewhere nicer with some real fucking drinks." Lori holds her own against much more haggard old men day to day, but even Will can see she's embarrassed. She doesn't like being dressed down in front of them, weaker, feminine - that's not the kind of work relationship she wants to paint a picture of. She wears dirty jeans and a washed out polo like the best of the guys.

Frank is getting irritated. Will is almost incandescent with anger watching her shrink in on herself, keeping her eyes on her smoke.

"You can go be full of yourself downtown," says Will, hand around the bottom of a pilsner glass. "Beer's just as good here - it's the same goddamn beer brand," he adds with a snort.

The shiny-toothed man looks at Will like a person looks at a dead bird, or a run over bag of fries. “Same beer, different environment, man. Just because you’re ok with dirty glasses and a bunch of crusty old guys doesn’t me she’s got to sit through it.” He has a silver money clip shining from his front shirt pocket, something with looping initials. No personal self-worth, just cashflow, brings the guys out for the weekend because he can’t be sure if he has college buddies because he went to college or because he has buddies. What a joke.

“She came here with me, you moron,” Will finally snarls, taking another drink, turning on his bar stool. His heart is racing - he’s so uncomfortable with confrontation most of the time, but he hates entitled shits like this.

“You can keep your white trash mouth to yourself,” says the guy. “You some kind of fag, or are you looking for some kind of fight, you scrawny asshole?”

Will takes a drink of his beer, puts down a 20 dollar bill for his tab. He’s heard this story before. He knows how it ends too. There’s a void opening in him, and he is calm. “You know what,” he says, stretching. “I think I am.”

And like a strike of lightning, he hits the guy in the nose so hard he feels the cartilage crack.

(*There will be hematomas, swelling, misalignment of the nostrils and damage to the sinuses, injuries in line with violent confrontations and blunt force -)*

(*“If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would become someone other than yourself.”*)

The guy wails, and his friends rush forward, but Will’s not done, grabbing him by the collar.

“So what do you really have to offer, huh?” he sneers. “Some big name daddy of yours bought that watch for you, and probably your boys trip. Do you get an allowance? Do you think you have value because you have money, that women will want you because you, what, smiled and offered them something? Because I’ve got news for you - every last person in

here is on a clock for expiration, and you'll only ever be remembered for some charitable donation made in your name that's on a plaque. A small name in a list of names."

He drops him, and the guy skitters back. "So I guess your money's got that going for you - what a star you are, how memorable for your perfect teeth and tasteless personality," Will adds, pulling him up by his ear.

(*"Do you have trouble with taste?"*)

The guy is grabbing at his nose, where great bursts of blood are coming down his chin. Will thinks of Beau, and the guy in Biloxi. He did say he knew the ending of the story, after all.

"What the hell are you looking at?" he yells at the bar patrons, who are all staring at him. They know him - isn't this skinny Will that works for Frank? Isn't this that quiet kid that works on engine parts, and drinks light beers during the day so he can drink the harder stuff at night? What morbid things to say, they murmur. Funny thing, watching someone's temper get the better of them.

There's drops of blood from the trust-fund moron on the ground, shining darkly in the low lights of the bar. The guy's friends herd him out of the bar, and Lori and Frank just look at him with raised brows and big eyes, Lori's cigarette dangling limply from her lips.

(*You'd put his money clip clear through his eye. Keep the wad of 20s tucked into his front shirt pocket and leave him somewhere obvious to see.*)

Funny thing, how close to savage he really is.

So Hannibal is right about a second thing.

But no one's gonna tell on him, even if they should. They all know Lori, and fuck tourists anyway. (*"Sorry, video wasn't recording," says the bar owner when the police come back later wanting to identify you.*) Frank says thank you later - he would have done the same.

It’s not true, but Will appreciates the sentiment.

The weekend arrives, and Will goes fly-fishing.

Before the sun comes up, he walks the dogs, makes a sandwich, and loads up the boat with his gear. He’d take Buster and Winston with him, but Buster barks at the marsh birds, and it feels unfair to leave him alone.

“Sorry, bud,” Will says, and scratches Winston’s ears.

Will thinks about calling Lawrence initially. He can’t teach him to fly-fish, or stand in the water and know when is the best time to draw back or push forward, but they could ride along the river together on the boat, drink hot toddies with their lunch, maybe grab dinner after they take the dogs on the afternoon walk. Lawrence would have a good time.

But he doesn’t.

Attachment, for all that he wants it, feels foreign today. It’s been a few days since he eviscerated a grown, stupid child of a man who won’t learn anything. Spare the rod, spoil the child, but the rod is cutting the child’s money off, not some backwater hick decimating his nose. He’s amazed how at peace he feels, thinking about the cracking of the nasal ridge between his middle and ring finger knuckle. There’s an attractive purple bruise building there, like a ring.

Will’s not catching sturgeon today, but he does snag a trout, watching its scales and spots dazzle in the hazy daylight. There’s another storm coming in from the west, and if he wants to take the dogs out, he’d better do it soon.

He gets out the Volvo for this trip, once he's docked Daisy in the harbor, and walked his way up the town hill. He listens to the engine that he has spent thousands of miles in concert with and letting the dogs settle themselves in the cabin. They cross the Youngs Bridge, and admire the white seabirds and coots bobbing in the calm waters.

Fort Stevens Park on the sandy peninsula of the Desdemona Shoal is eerie for Will each time the three of them visit. Short pines grow, but not by much, covered in heavy moss and blanched in places along the trunks. Different signs in the park talk about tsunamis, and salt water creep. It is flat, and all he can think of is crests of water burying them. (*What a relief it would be.*)

He's heard about the shipwreck on the westernmost shore here, the remnants of an iron hull that once guarded wooden timbers. The sands are almost black, especially in the drizzling rain that is rolling in. The iron skeleton stands as proudly for all that it is by itself and uncomfortably far enough into the surf that Will doesn't want to risk his shoes. The dogs are chasing each other in the rainy surf, happy to be loose even if not warm.

It does bring something to mind. Will thinks on the councilmember, shoved into the cherry tree, grafted into it like English walnut to black to make a more beautiful fruit. It was the first of a progression of steps that leads to his eventual release from Baltimore State. It's impressive how well things fell together. He never gets to see more than a few pictures of it, even with the Tattlecrime photos, but looking at the hull of the shipwreck now, and thinking on that tree, Will wonders.

Would it have atrophied, moved to any other spot? He feels denied the opportunity to have seen it in person, to smell the hyacinth. It wasn't intended for him to see, and it's unreasonable to appreciate it (*at least in front of other people*), but it was a terrifically crafted thing. It's sad to think of its blossoming branches rotting away in some industrial dumpster - diatom analysis complete, usefulness past. A waste of a good structure.

It's upsetting.

He's thankful that the wind and the rain are going, that the dogs are happy, and on this remote horn at the end of the world, no one can see him upset over the trashing of an idea that was so ugly to everyone else. With nothing but himself to face, he can admit he misses Hannibal's fanciful vision, no matter how distorted. He misses easy conversation, dancing around

violence. (*And would you have ever been violent to each other? Even when he's hurting you, his hands are always so tender, and that makes it hurt more* .)

Will only has himself these days, and unwatched he still struggles to actually be himself. How's that for a waste of a structure?

The office phone is ringing, and Lori is not here. It is 11:48am, and Frank is on lunch with Scow at the end of the dock. It is one of the three cardinal rules to not interrupt, as he is told on day one. Having seen a sales guy make this mistake, and Frank nearly having a coronary from his irritation about needing some peace and quiet, Will has learned that this time is sacrosanct.

On one hand, Will wants to ignore it. Not his monkeys, not his circus, and he's terrible with some of Frank's clients who have a complete nonsensical way of describing what's wrong on the phone. (*"Can you just bring it in?" you huff one time. "I'm not exactly psychic."*)

On the other hand, it's slow - he needs something to do until Frank tells him what he wants to do with the little wooden sailboat that has a structural crack in the front mast. He's an engine guy, not a shipwright.

Will sighs.

"Frank's Marine Repair," he says when he picks up the old beige plastic phone receiver, and doesn't add anything else. If he's awkward about this, the caller can be too. Fair is fair.

"Oh hi!" says a woman. "Is this Frank's Repair?" She's entirely effusive in her enthusiasm, and the static of the phone only makes it scratch more at his ear.

"Did you miss the first part?" says Will, incredulous for a moment, before sighing, a little guilty. He doesn't really have a reputation to maintain, but Frank's business does. "Wait, yes,

this is Frank's. What can I help you with?"

"Oh thank goodness, I hear he's the guy to talk to," says the woman. She seems expectant, not adding anything useful, and the gap in conversation goes a little too long. It's still irritating.

Will shuffles on his feet. "Yeah, people say that. Really good with his boats. Is there something I can help you with?"

"You could say that. May I ask who I'm speaking to, since you're not Frank?"

"Just the mechanical assistant, I don't do much with diagnostics" he replies. This is so weird. "Can I take a message or something? I can have him call you back when he's in the office in about an hour."

"It's the funniest thing, but I think I might have found my answer," she giggles. "Sorry, slow on the Google search, gotta get through forums and forums of guy stuff. Don't know much about boats, but the internet truly has a lot of fantastic information."

"Well I guess that's good," he grouches. He wishes her luck mentally - he'll tell Frank and they'll have a good laugh about it later, and wonders what kind of a disaster boat will float into the dock, if not on a carrier. "Have a great day."

"You too, Will."

He doesn't think about it, because everyone calls him Will. It's not like they didn't have a shirt embroidered for him and presented like the Golden Fleece. (*Lori referred to it as being as good as being declared the future king of England and to say thank you - you're part of the team now* .) He'd assume they read a Yelp review. There's at least two that mention him, one complaining, one praising. It's pretty par for the course. Everyone laughed at the negative one.

He's just glad to be off the phone.

He gets home, much later than he means to after work. The sailors are idling by the docks when Will pulls Daisy into her space, and all a chatter. Will's getting better at playing nice, and tells them about his weekend plans to start cleaning up the downstairs of the house, and yes, of course he'll call if he needs help doing it, or help drinking his beer. (*This is mostly Russell, who has taken notice of your ancient fridge as some sort of place you hide shitty Coors Light cans and chilled glasses for cognac, leaving no room for salad mix, chicken -- normal things. The freezer is just blocks of bait fish. You're almost annoyed with it yourself, but you don't eat much these days.*)

Will doesn't like to make the dogs wait to go outside. When he unlocks his front door, his first thought is that it's weird the dogs don't meet him downstairs, ready to take a walk and the smells of the yard.

When he ascends the stairs and sees Winston and Buster following a wickedly red head of hair on a petite woman, who is industriously taking photos of every nook and cranny of his busted up kitchen, his second thought is that Freddie Lounds is here.

Freddie Lounds is here.

"Oh hi Will," she says, hanging her camera from her neck, smiling like Christmas morning. "I don't know if you'll figure out how, but I saw you like small town craft beer. I wasn't sure if I'd actually find you here, thought for sure I'd have to go to the boat repair shop, but you probably shouldn't leave your dogs on the porch," she adds. "Random people might recognize them."

Things pull together a bit at the seams. Winston is very distinctive. Buster, terrible guard dog that he is, follows Freddie in expectation of attention. Winston, if it's possible for a dog to look unhappy, watches nervously between the two of them.

(*"It's the funniest thing, but I think I might have found my answer."*)

Will feels his head shake. He chews the inside of his bottom lip until he tastes metal. Freddie Lounds is here.

"It's an amazing thing, the internet. Imagine seeing a missing person enjoying himself on stouts and sours," she adds with the wave of a hand. "I almost didn't recognize you. You look like some sort of hipster Jesus with the long hair, by the way, if Jesus was the type to wear Marmot jackets, flannel, and knitted beanies. Is this what going through a Jesus Christ Superstar phase is like?"

"It's the mode of dress around here," Will finds himself saying in a daze.

She puts on her best foxy smile. "Should have pegged you for hipster trash with that scruffy beard you wouldn't get rid of. Looks like it grew in a bit."

"Looks like," he rasps.

Freddie Lounds is here, and she's going to ruin everything.

She hums a bit. "What brings you to Oregon, Will? All kinds of exciting things happening back in Maryland, and Jack Crawford won't give me the time of day on what you think. Are you really all the way out here having some kind of poverty Gatsby experience? I thought for sure they'd sent you off to a private mental clinic like Porthaven, but you sold your house," she adds. "Seems a bit drastic."

Will paces over to the kitchen, opens the cabinet, and finds his Remy Martin, the very special one with the centaur and javelin. (*You're supposed to give nice things to guests, right? Is that what she is?*) He'll need to be more stable for this conversation - something in both hands to keep them occupied. *Nothing like drinking for stability,* Will thinks, trying not to snort. He grabs two of the chilled vintage jam jar glasses from the refrigerator. "I'm afraid a lot of my life has been very drastic recently. Seemed fitting to tie it up with something fitting the theme."

“As is the mode of dress?” she grins, digging. In another life, she would be charming. Freddie’s a cute woman, with delicate features excepting a strong zygomatic ridge, like the cheekbones of her face are desperate to escape her skin. She’d be harmless if she wasn’t fixated on him having some sort of story all the time.

“Circumstances as they were, you’ll understand there wasn’t much left to salvage. Things are better here. Quieter.”

Without missing a beat, Will pours her a glass of cognac in the jam glass, something with a cartoon character on it that made him think of peanut butter sandwiches with his dad. He makes a big show of opening the bottle, and gesturing to the label - it really is nice stuff. He puts it down on the edge of the wooden counter. His fingers flex, empty again. She rolls her eyes at him, and makes to grab for the glass.

While she reaches, Will also reaches - for a massive steel spanner wrench he’s left near the sink. It’s heavy with importance. It’s heavy with his wrath and fear and justice, and without much thought on his part, shatters her right temple as he brings it in a wide arc into her skull.

He thinks she realizes what he’s doing before he does, but doesn’t have a chance to respond. Circumstances as they are.

Freddie’s head hits the kitchen floor with a thud.

For a hysterical moment, Will is certain she’s going to stand up and look at him with that affronted wide-eyed glance she likes to bestow to him on occasion. “What the fuck, Graham,” she’ll say. “They’ll lock you up so deep in the ground this time even exonerating evidence isn’t going to be enough. They’ll lock you up so long you’ll forget what another person looks like, much less be able to pretend to be one,” she’ll say. “Everyone is going to know.”

He doesn’t know how to respond to that. He already doesn’t know how he’s going to respond to the reality of knocking the shit out of Freddie Lounds in his unrenovated kitchen, no doubt looking like some sort of Manson-type with his wild hair and painfully wide eyes. The police report is going to be awful. He's probably going to real prison this time, and isn't that fun?

From the base of her head where it meets the ground, blood and cognac from her jam glass starts sinking into the basin of the tile grout. On the side that he hits, there's a clear depression from the spanner wrench.

"Well," says Will, matter of fact and dazed as the dogs start to move towards Freddie, looking down into the jam glass and taking a sip of cognac. " *Shit* ."

act 2 - he can no more weigh an emotion than he can weigh a soul

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the longest time, Will is simply numb. There are insects chirping in the late evening air, and a nighthawk calling out quietly between the occasional rumble of cars. Other than the disturbance currently on the kitchen floor, there are no other indications of wrongness. If anything, he experiences a strange calm come over him, not unlike watching flecks of blood on his glasses in the kitchen of Garrett Jacob Hobbes, a reverse nebula that cuts the brightness of the Minnesota morning. It had smelled of toast, and sausage links.

Tonight smells of the sea, and distilled spirits.

Freddie is very small this way, curled in on herself - she has always been a very petite female, but without the fire of her bluster and hundred mile per hour thinking, she is just a little shell of a woman. She's almost unrecognizable. (*The same dysphoria descends on you, reading the story of Beverly's dissection. You're so used to seeing people you don't know post-mortem, that any corpse is a stranger. It's more comfortable that way - it's a figural tableau instead of a someone.*) She's wearing a little green blazer with a pin of a greyhound on the lapel - she must have thought she was being funny.

The feeling eventually crawls back into his hands and feet, even as he pushes the dogs away from the growing pool on the kitchen floor. He doesn't need them tracking even *more* forensic evidence into the house.

He mostly doesn't want to have to bleach and re-oil his almost restored hardwood floors. He spent a long time on that.

His priorities are probably out of order.

(*Let's contemplate your situation.*)

Professor Will Graham's curriculum vitae, a summary:

Will Graham, M.S, F.B.I Special Agent

-Professor of Forensic Sciences, Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy

-Special Consulting Agent, Behavioral Sciences Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation

-American Academy of Forensic Sciences Scholarship Fellow

-George Washington University Scholarship Fellow and Speaker, Forensic Science

-University of Virginia, Arlington, Speaker, Entomology

-New Orleans Police Department, Homicide Investigation, Retired.

-New Orleans Police Department, Treme-Lafitte Task Unit, Retired.

Select Known Publications Include:

"The Standard Monograph of Time of Death Based on Insect Activity," *First Author. First published in the Journal of Forensic Sciences, 2013. Second publication in Nature Magazine, 2014. Third publication in Entomological Society of America, 2014.*

"Methods of Forensic Interrogation in Homicide Investigations in conjunction with Eyewitnesses and Character Witnesses," *Second Author. First published in Journal of Forensic Sciences in partnership with Tulane University, 2008.*

Education:

Tulane University, New Orleans, LA

School of Science & Engineering

Bachelor of Cell and Molecular Biology

Graduate Magna Cum Laude

George Washington University, Washington, DC

Master of Forensic Investigation

Department of Forensic Sciences

Graduate Magna Cum Laude

George Washington University, Washington, DC

Master of Forensic Biology

Department of Forensic Sciences

Graduate Magna Cum Laude

Character testimonial: *"Detective Will Graham has been a valuable member of the New Orleans Police Department, with a closure rate of 62% across more than 300 cases in his years of service, the highest of any detective in New Orleans and the surrounding parishes and certainly the youngest. I would characterize him as having the greatest emotional and intellectual insight when working with the scenes of the event, investigation and interviews of witnesses, and accurately understanding a perpetrator's course of action, no matter how nefarious or skilled.*

We expect to see him do great things as he leaves us to pursue extended education in the Forensic Sciences in Maryland, and would happily reinstate him to the New Orleans homicide task force should he find himself homesick for us, and wish to wear the crescent of our great city again."

- Officer Gregory Renault, Head of Homicide Investigations, N.O.P.D., March 2006

(*No one knows better than you what to do next. Nobody knows what you are. Isn't that great news?*)

Of course he’s going to bury Freddie in the basement.

It’s hardly even a question. It seems like it was always a design of fate, and only Will’s job to execute it properly, puns intended. He’s already thought about it once for a mental exercise - the physical exercise of actually dragging her into the basement to put her in the decommissioned septic tank is just phantom muscle memory.

(*You’re not Hannibal - utility over appearance is practical when you need the best final product in the shortest amount of time. You’re brand new at this after all. Maybe you can save the skilled craftsman finishes for another day if you find yourself needing to get better at this.*)

But first, some practicalities at hand.

The rest of the night is still ahead.

From the drawer closest to his refrigerator, he grabs latex gloves from a box - he had kept them for bleaching the unclean appliances, thinking he’d need them again later. This wasn’t really what Will had in mind, but needs drive, he guesses.

Will quickly grabs the phone from a pocket inside her blazer, covered in a fancy marbled plastic case and a chromed pop stand. It’s as stylish and loud as anything else about Freddie. The screen is locked. Well, that’s a problem. He swipes the unlock toggle.

Scan your finger or enter your password.

He looks down at the body.

Maybe not a problem.

Bending down close, he grabs for her hand, which is tight and small. It's still early - uncurling her fingers to straighten her right index finger enough to unlock the phone isn't at all difficult. Fingerprints maintain their shape a long time post-mortem, and hers are fresh. He's probably not the first to do it, but it does feel particularly drug cartel appropriate accessing her phone this way. Maybe he can get a fun street name, like Tsar Wilhelm, or Crowbar Graham. (*Spanner Wrench Graham doesn't have quite the right rhythm, don't you think?*)

The contents of the phone paint a slightly different picture from what Will would normally think of Freddie Lounds. All the necessities, email, camera, Twitter and Facebook for immediate life-ruining potential, a WordPress editing app - they take the front and center. Work things. Will hates her, but he's never thought Freddie was anything but horrifyingly productive with her time.

Included also are beer tracking apps, photos of cats she must like in town windows, signs that made her laugh. She has an extensive list of contacts, but very few favorites - "Mom and Pop" are her most frequent callers, but with sometimes months between in the call log.

Poor familial relationships, workaholic, self-entertained. Solitary. Likes animals, not people. Lots of acquaintances, very few friends. Not bothered by other people's feelings, or comfortable with ignoring them even if close. A person perfect for the list of sociopathic jobs, but one with an identity separate of journalism and generally making a pain in the ass of herself.

Will swallows tightly, and navigates away.

The email account is what he needs most, and upon opening it, Will is temporarily discouraged. Mailing lists, random forum message notifications and periodical columns galore line the inbox, far worse than his had ever been. In the last two hours alone, she's received 50 emails. Fortunately, Will knows approximately what he's looking for. He searches the content for "Astoria" - no matches. He tries again with "Portland", and 5 emails come up. None of them are particularly old, so he doesn't think she's known where he is for very long. It doesn't seem like she planned on staying long in Oregon.

A car rental, a hotel room, and a flight to and from home. These are the things that he needs. The car, a nondescript Chevy Impala from the PDX terminal, is his first stop. He needs to know what's in it. The hotel room, fortunately, offers remote check-in - she hasn't done it yet. She's had a long day of figuring Will's life out, and probably doesn't think to stop and do this one small thing, unsure if she'll stay out this way. That's good. That's one less base to cover, one less possibly long drive.

Bending down again, he checks the small purse she had slung over her shoulder, something discreet with a tablet and notepad. The car keys are here. So that's good too.

He carries her down the stairs, wrapped in a blue tarp that he's kept to prevent his cans of floor stripper and wax from making rings in the wood grain. This feels natural. He doesn't want her to leave any marks either.

The hole in the concrete stares at him, and he stands over it, even though his arms are burning from the strain. It seems callous to just throw her down into the hole, wrapped up or not, but really, what is he going to do? Hold a funeral? Attend a wake for one, and pour out a drink for the bitch? He has about two hours to get control of the narrative, and he'll be damned if some vestige of humanity is spared for her, when all she's done is pull his strings to see him twitch under pressure, cat pictures and well-meaning forgotten parents or not. Every corpse is human once, and he's seen hundreds.

She makes less noise when thrown in than he thought she would, just the crinkle of the plastic tarp. He should do something to mark the moment. In a fit of bad humor, he salutes her. *You were right*, he wants to tell her, but this is time for show, not tell. He grabs the car keys, locks his front door and basement entrance, and braves his way out to the street.

It's late, and other than the sound of a car door slamming from a few streets away, it's quiet. In the older part of town, it's mostly old timers and people who have had their homes in the family for decades. Not a lot to get excited about here. When Will slips out onto the sidewalk, it's only him in any direction. The dogs' heads sit is silhouette from the living room windows, raised up over the street.

The Chevy Impala, both fortunately and unfortunately, is a few blocks away from his house. He finds it by listening for the chirp of the remote unlock from the key fob. It's almost a relief to hear it. Close enough to reach quickly, far enough away to not be associated with his property. (*Smart girl, but also not smart. What did she think you would do - miraculously*

recognize her busted up Hertz rental out of the hundreds of vehicles on the block? You're empathetic, not a goddamn wizard, looking at sedans for veiled importance.)

With a new pair of gloves, he checks the front of the car, reaching for the glove box. Rental papers within - it's due back in three days. There's five scratches already noted when it was picked up, most of which superficial at best - Freddie is truly determined to not pay for damages after waiving insurance, he thinks with a snort.

The trunk has her suitcase, and a camera bag. He takes both, and the rental agreement. These he runs back to the house.

The car itself? He drives to the downtown streets, touching as little as possible and taking a circuitous route that will make it look like she came from a different part of town. He can leave the rental at an unmetered spot in the neighboring area - it won't be towed away, no one the wiser of how long she's been without. He leaves the keys under the seat. It can't be helped that it will be called in as a stolen car at some point, but at least it won't be near him. Astoria isn't famous for bookkeeping, and in the event that someone cares enough to trace her back out here from phone records or cell towers, they can do it well away from Will's house.

(*How long before Mom and Pop are concerned? When do the bills come due for someone like Freddie?*)

Astoria's small enough that Will can walk home, mostly unconcerned about street cameras, but he still avoids the bank and a few of the nicer shop fronts. It would be a sloppy way to be caught that far away from his home when by all reasoning he should be at home getting pleasantly drunk alone like the hermit he is, scratching dog ears and eating a frozen microwave dinner.

Still an hour and 13 minutes to do more damage control. Still an hour and 13 minutes to get drunk and eat a frozen dinner, if he really wants to complete the story of his night.

---

20 bags of Quikcrete line the walls, as guileless as bags of flour. His 5 gallon plastic bucket in front of him is ready for mixing.

(*You're tired - you don't have time to be tired* .)

Freddie, at the bottom of the hole in the basement, continues to be quite dead. He could pretend she wasn't there at all were it not for the necessity of time. Will's still figuring out if he feels remorse - right now it's just dutiful action.

While Will likes to think that he's doing this artfully, intentionally, the reality is that it really is just the quickest plan forensically without implicating himself in multiple areas. He won't need to be seen driving around town, disappearing into backroads, catching the attention of a private backcountry homeowner. It's too hard to get her from the house to the dock to the boat without someone calling him out on obviously not needing a large rug in the tiny cabin, and no one likes people who dump in the water here. (*"If I gotta throw my shit out on bulky trash day, so does everyone else," says Frank, using a hook to pull a trashed plastic floating raft from the water on a lazy weekend morning spent fishing - you concurred. It's grossly irresponsible.*)

It's not really ideal to have her on the property, but it's not like everyone in town knows he was working on his house and had a hole to fill. Needing two less bags of Quikcrete is just convenient for him. Maybe he can use the extra to redo the front walkway when it's dry out in late June.

He pours himself a drink, and pours concrete into the hole, ignoring to the best of his ability how the blue tarp slowly disappears into the murk. Freddie's phone, shattered and sim card destroyed once Will is certain he doesn't need anything off it, is thrown in as well. There's only two towers it could ping in the city, so the likelihood of the telecom narrowing it down to anything other than "west side of town" is unlikely. She didn't think to tell anyone that she was looking for him, and other than a few beer events she's tagged in her calendar for the weekend (*again with the beer tracking*), he doesn't think he sees anything that screams 'Will Graham!" Camera and duffel bag follow after.

It takes 48 hours for concrete to harden, as long as a month to completely set, and potentially years to fully cure in the dampness of the Oregon ground, drawing the water into itself. It'll draw it in from Freddie too. Bodies are up to 60% water. She may chemically be a work in

progress for the rest of his life. So at least she's going to get that in the end - she'll always be a threat somewhere in the back of Will Graham's mind.

(*It's unfortunate that if someone knew better, you'd be the obvious suspect. You've never exactly hidden how much you dislike her, and there's a lot at stake. She thought she was so clever, like she was going to catch you up to something, because what does Will Graham do other than think like murderers?*)

Will mixes, shovels, and smooths layers of cement for hours. There's no grotesque trophies, no attention-grabbing display. He keeps the greyhound pin though, hiding it on top of a wooden support beam running along the ceiling above. He thinks it would please her to know that he did, that he recognized the small nod she was making.

(*You become one, apparently* .)

Morning dawns with a sparkling clean kitchen, the ancient and previously disgusting honeycomb tiles shining like the day they were laid. He'll gut the majority of the cabinets today. He had already ordered new ones anyway, and he likes perpetuating the image of a man at work, renovating his home, definitely *not* covering up first degree murder, no sir.

No one is looking at him. No one here knows Freddie Lounds. No one here really knows Will Graham either, but who can honestly say that they do? Will's not even sure if he knows himself on good days, and the last 24 hours tells Will that he might never entirely.

His stomach cramps when he drinks a bottle of water from the fridge. Stress, probably.

Just 32 more hours before the basement floor looks relatively normal. The cement will have filled every part of the hole, sought out the soft flesh from between blue plastic. The hollows of her nose, ears, mouth, eyes, all burned as the fluids are used to harden the concrete. (*Your gut clenches, thinking of the chemicals binding, never fast enough for comfort* .) Maybe he'll drywall in parts of the space, make it a little more like home, with the exception of the literal

sarcophagus in the middle of the foundation. He almost wishes he could tell someone about it - it's gone so well for something so grotesquely unexpected.

Will goes to work, like he does every week day. He's never really looked well rested, but his uniforms are clean, and he combs his hair to pull back in a knot, and it's as if nothing happened.

"Morning, Will," says Lori, unlocking the front office as he pulls up in the Volvo. "I got fresh coffee in the car - just let me straighten up the back room table and I'll pour ya one."

"I could use some," he says.

"Rough night?"

"All nights are rough nights," he says, with a half smile.

For a week, Will watches for the Chevy Impala to disappear.

It takes three.

It's the last he hears about it. Maybe things are fine. Maybe there's really just that few people who care about where Freddie Lounds is. Maybe if Will can disappear unremarked on and almost unfound for months, so can she.

Summer moves quickly in Astoria, with fair days and blue skies that make the Columbia look bright and promising, and a regular haze of morning fog to keep the air cool until midday. Frank keeps Will busy with passenger vessels, and the time passes. However, the volume of tourists coming in and out of the weekends increases exponentially, and soon the sailor crew is resolved to save their fishing for after work - the weekends are too much of a shit show.

That's ok though. With the good weather there's no excuse to not keep working on the house. He's wanted to do some of the exterior repairs while he can, saving the inside for literal rainy days. It's a one man crew, and he's got a lifetime to make the inside presentable, and the only unexpected guest didn't really get the opportunity to comment on the particular shade of puce that the only bathroom is, or weird bare floors that Will has torn much of the carpet and linoleum out of.

The only thing he has truly improved is finally waxing and sealing his hardwood floors so the dogs won't track wet paw prints on it anymore, from the dew in the grass, the water in the dog bowls, and other less savory things. He installs black shaker cabinets with a shiny white quartz countertop (*"it's super popular," says an effusive young woman in the kitchen department of a Home Depot*) and a wide basin sink in the kitchen. It would be attractive with the honeycomb tile, but the egregious old fridge and cantankerous stove are a blight, and he still doesn't know what to do with the walls, or if he needs to replumb much else. He's not a chef. The kitchen is already quite progressed in comparison to spaces he actually uses. He probably should replace the appliances, but they function, and that's all he really needs.

He tries not to leave tools out when he's done though.

(*Remove temptation, like creamer for your coffee*.)

Will focuses on re-shingling the roof, enjoying the bridge standing vigilant in the corner of his eye, withholding the portal to the edge of the world. The dogs circle in the yard below, and nap in the sun. When the sun goes down at night, he takes his medicine, and tries to not think of Freddie Lounds' body just slowly sinking into the earth, a woman-shaped depression in the concrete.

(*You often get up at night to check it to be sure - it's still ominously smooth, chalky grey with newness. You never stand on it, even to get to the washer and dryer across from it, like some*

sort of macabre hopscotch. You're afraid of leaving footprints even though you know, logically, it's not going to happen.)

He pictures her standing in places at times, at the edge of the new counters, glass in hand, or sometimes in the stairwell as he comes up to the bedroom. Sometimes the stag is next to her, breathing airlessly, never stirring a curl on her head, no matter how close. Death has perfected her appearance.

"You know they're not going to forget me forever," she says, just as tetchy and sharp-tongued as the real one, greyhound pin flashing near her throat. "I've got a big personality and a big mouth. Someone's going to care."

"The way they've cared about me?" he replies, and she never has an answer for that, because Will doesn't have one either, and she's just a part of Will these days. He would have preferred anyone else, really. But to be fair, she's given him something else to think about for a while. It's easy to forget other people's violence when yours just keeps transforming day by day.

(*You're not sorry that you did it, you're sorry that you're worried about getting caught. You're sorry that you have to challenge yourself on whether or not you're actually a good man. Wouldn't Hannibal think that's the most remarkable development, and don't you wish you could sneer at what would be his obvious delight?*)

"You had you'self a caller out here," says Beau, appropos of nothing one day. "Askin' after you."

They had been discussing how best to replace a support beam in the cottage's raised deck. It's slightly rotten, but it's hard work digging out poles, and he doesn't want to take the whole porch down for one beam. He had gone quiet before telling Will. Will had wondered if he dozed off in the Sunday afternoon sun.

What?

(*All at once it's a rush of recollection - Freddie's red hair sinking into the concrete. Freddie's head cracking open on the kitchen floor. Is somebody catching on?*)

Don't panic , he thinks, even as panic creeps up like a black cloud looming over the ridge.

Will feels his stomach sink - he's been so careful with Beau's information. Never so much as given it as an emergency contact on a medical form. He can't even think what it would have been connected to. Starting a missing persons investigation in Savannah hardly makes any sense, especially for a character witness like Beau. It must be something else. "When?" he breathes sharply out.

Beau yawns on the other side of the phone. "Don't get you' britches in a bind, I didn't tell 'em anything you'd care 'bout. Got all maudlin and drunk, m'self. A couple months ago, back in May," he says.

"And you're only now telling me about it?" The impatience is creeping into Will's voice, even as he tries to choke it back. (*Also relief - it's not what you think it's about after all.*)

"You was sick, 'member?" he drawls. "Well, I reckon that's unfair. You might not 'member."

Will huffs out a dry sigh, but clutches the phone tighter. "I remember being sick, sure. But we've talked since then, multiple times. Why on earth wouldn't you tell me about it? Who was it? What did they say?"

"A gentleman of some kind, very fancy. Made him drink dirty bird wit' me. He was lookin' mighty green by th' end of it."

Will goes white.

Hannibal.

“Wanted to know ‘bout some old property,” continues Beau. “At first, thought he was some kind of real estate guy. They always do that t’ me, bait me on the old house, but I sussed him out. Was lookin’ for what I knew ‘bout your new life.”

Hannibal found Beau, and Will feels a little green himself, thinking of his father, the tough hide that he is, passing so close to that strange dark planet’s orbit. Beau couldn’t have known how foolish it was - still is.

“And what did you say about that?” Will asks.

“Dat' unfortunate for you, you’re my boy, and you' just like me.”

(*The dockyard owner in Biloxi stumbles, and you, behind your father, watches the blood spot the painted white of the docks while Beau lights a cigarette, swearing a blue streak* .)

“Daddy,” Will starts, wincing, “you need to think about leaving. If it’s who I think it is, you’re not really safe there.” He paces the front of the house - there’s sunlight spilling through the musty white curtains, and the dogs are sleeping spread out in the wide rectangles of it. He itches with the need for activity. “You can come stay with me.”

“Son,” says Beau, starting in on the voice that always precedes a scolding, “I told you I ain’t told him somethin’ you’d care ‘bout, and I sure as shit ain’t goin’ somewhere. I got work tomorrow, and th' day after, and th' day after that. Been ‘while since th’ last time that happened.” His voice is raised, but steady. Beau clears his throat, breathes out a drag of a cigarette - Will can see it like it’s in his own face. “Had ourselves a meetin’ of minds, told ‘im that yours was best left alone. He went about his business, and I went on mine.”

Will’s almost sick with how much that can’t be true, but Beau won’t listen. Hannibal doesn’t do casual home visits. He wonders if he shouldn’t fly to Georgia and check on him or around the property. Maybe he’s left Abigail’s second ear as some sort of macabre gift set. Maybe with no Freddie Lounds to write about his exploits, he’s back to digging in his favorite soil. (*But you’ve already bloomed, haven’t you?*) There’s no way coarse, nicotine stained Beau Graham wasn’t the offensive sonuvabitch he is to everyone when the Chesapeake Ripper comes to call, meeting of the minds or not, and there’s no way it was a meeting without purpose.

They argue for some minutes about it, but Beau is his father, and Will can't think of a time that he doesn't get the final say. "Stay at work, son. You done a lot with you'self. I wouldn'ta told you if I'd know you'd get bent outta shape 'bout it."

"Daddy," Will says, "you're one of the few things that I have that's mine. I just want you to be ok."

(*You're not, but he can be.*)

"Aw hell, boy," says Beau. "I'm hardly worth holdin' on to." The clink of a glass can be heard from the other side of the receiver. "Don't worry so much," he adds. "Ev'rybody carryin' something, so no time to carry worry with th' rest of it. But I reckon this - that was a heavy burdened man, come drinkin' on my porch."

(*But at least you know where Hannibal was, the last time you come a callin', and what will you do with that?*)

It's a strange thought. Hannibal Lecter, with the lightest feet, the sharpest mouth, the brightest mind, heavy with much of anything.

He thinks about it long into the night, eventually dreaming.

He dreams he's heavy enough himself to sink down with Freddie, past the concrete, past the pipes and infill, coastal shale, brackish tar, limestone, and granite, inexorably drawn to the iron beneath. He, Freddie and Hannibal alike come to rest in the core of the earth. They all deserve this kind of literal hell, and with Hannibal as the guide down to its ninth circle, where traitors go, where elements are pressed into their most honest form under pressure.

(*You, a traitor to guests. Hannibal, a traitor to kindred.*)

Will gazes on in horror and recognition of his belonging here, in the crushing weight, even as Hannibal leans in to whisper something blistering hot, stinging his ears. Hannibal's hands are like lead on either side of his face. He can't hear over the hum of gravity.

He wakes up aroused for the first time in months. He ignores it, and takes advantage of the still-shitty water heater to cool himself down in the shower, hands resolutely clenched.

July becomes August, and everything is fine. Beau keeps texting on occasion and calling rarely, and nothing more comes from Hannibal's strange visit to the South.

Will starts leaving the upstairs windows open at night to let the air circulate while he reads with a dog on either side of him - 100 year old houses aren't famous for their ventilation and air conditioning, and while it's nowhere the kind of humidity of the south, the breeze off the bay is balmy. The air mattress continues to sit proudly on the wooden floor of the second story, accompanied by a stack of plumbing and electrical manuals that he picks up from the library book sales. It makes an excellent impromptu side table for a brass lamp and a laptop to sit on.

Tonight, his email inbox coughs up a request for him to confirm if he's still on sabbatical, or if he's just quit. Turns out that 6 months is about all that the FBI can take without further discussion, which feels like such bullshit. They seemed happy to let him sit incarcerated before, so why not idle out of the press?

It's respectfully requested that if you wish to end your position at the Academy that you fill out the following form by September 20th. Failure to submit documentation by this date may incur penalties, up to and including dismissal from your teaching position, at which point your accrued PTO will be converted to the standard Federal payout rate, and your benefits terminated.

God, please, terminate me , thinks Will. He's not going to reply. Anyone who's not figured out he's not going to reply is a moron, as far as he's concerned. The extra cash from the PTO would be a nice flush of funding to put his attention into the water heater and the eternally

awful bathroom. He'll figure out the health insurance. He's not a walking bag of disaster pills these days, and his cost of living is very low.

Two other emails catch his attention, after months of silence from both - Alana Bloom, and the absent Virgil Maro of albatross fame. Will feels himself stir for a moment, excited and afraid of the second. It's been so long since there's been any sign of communication with Hannibal, that were it not for Beau's admission to meeting with Hannibal in Savannah, Will would have assumed that he was now a passe subject, easily toyed with and easily forgotten.

(*The sting of shame from your dream hasn't faded - it seems unfair you're still wound up, and Hannibal is blissfully untroubled by you. You suppose maybe it was always like that.*)

Alana is an unusual addition. She had been so disappointed with him when they last met. Will has studiously ignored her since, up until the spring when she had stopped trying, and what a relief the lack of trying became.

He doesn't pretend to know what her life is like these days. He always understood her anger, but it's only with the distance of time that he feels prepared to dive into her head tonight.

He clicks it open.

From: ***abloom@faculty.gwu.edu***

To: ***wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org***

BCC: ***52hertzgraham@gmail.com***

FW: (No Subject - Sent from my iPhone)

Dear Will,

I don't think you actually read these, and that makes the best kind of confessional. I have a few things to throw off the boat of Alana Bloom's life today, so that I can stop taking on water. I think you felt the same leaving the hospital.

I found myself in one of the courtyards at the academy today, the one with the reflecting pool that makes the good lunch spot, and realized it's almost been a year since things went off the rails. I'm sure you'd say that you weren't sure there were ever rails, but I remember that you had made a space for yourself here, and that I just wanted you to be left alone. If you've found somewhere that's true finally, I'm glad. I hope it has more dogs - I'm sure you miss yours.

Hindsight is a sharp, hooked tool. I can use it now to know that Jack was never going to be happy with simple consults. He's on mandatory compassionate leave these days, but I can see he will probably go back to the grindstone without the distraction of Bella to come home to anymore. It was always your choice to work, and you'd resent my input, but sometimes I wish I stopped him at the beginning.

I also regret my referral to Hannibal, as weird as it is to say that, and probably the first time. I can see now he was never going to be happy with a simple professional relationship with you. I couldn't at the time. I don't think he would have admitted to it either if I asked. He's a very proud man, and it's kind of refreshing to see a real crack in the armor for once. I don't think he really expected you to be the way that you were when he accepted the referral. I know that sounds terrible out of context, but it's the best way I can explain it.

It doesn't likely change anything for you, but the three of us back here have gone our separate ways for one reason or another. It's a relief to step back out of it. It helps me see we were unfair with you. Three people in charge of safekeeping someone who didn't want to be kept to begin with. I'm sorry. The other two probably won't say the same, but moving forward is best done in clean air.

Take it as a comfort that even if you don't miss the people here, that your absence is felt.

Yours,

Alana

Will rolls onto his back, laptop in hand, thoughtful.

Will, being what he is, has imagined the normalcy of life with Alana Bloom. Beautiful Alana Bloom, therapist, lecturer, academic, and Will, her withdrawn but bright partner. Attractive house, too many dogs, hikes on the weekends, and dinners out after classes are finished for the day, but respectable distance for work. It's what every career-driven business professional can hope for in a romance. It's bland in some ways, but comfortable.

It feels good to let the vision of that go, lost somewhere before even prison made it clear it was just a thought.

He doesn't forgive her most days, remembering how truly awful he felt, watching her leave him behind in pieces to take up with Hannibal. Poor sick Will, doesn't know what he's doing. Poor misguided Will, someone's pointed him in the wrong direction. All those lunches she talks about in the courtyard at Quantico, politely sitting near but not close to each other. The long flirtation, left cold, and him forced to watch it spark elsewhere. It's in the past now, and it's possible they were ruined for each other even before then, but it still smarts.

He reads the email once more, and deletes it. Message received, Alana's earthy cares cast off into the sea - the last disappointment from a disappointing friendship.

(*She was never really going to understand you - even you can admit it* .)

Staring at the ceiling of the bedroom, with it's old painted tin tile surface and flat glass dome light, Will wonders if it's better to just stop for the night, maybe not unload the entire truck in one go. He could roll on his side, one person removed from his burdens, maybe sleep a little better.

He's not going to. He's got a different wound to prod. This one is fairly recent, sent only last night.

From the subject line, he's expecting some sort of pretentious portents of doom, but what he gets is another thing entirely.

From: "Virgil Maro", onacheronsshore@protonmail.com

To: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

Subject: The Rule of Saint Benedict

I have done some wandering myself as of late, Will. It puts me in the mindset of you.

Tonight's missive will spare you an ornithology lesson. The aggravated response it provoked to my last suppositions was indeed a response, more than you had offered in many weeks' time, but left me at a loss. How does one respond to a few lines of prose? The culmination of shame that the mariner awaits is a fitting quip, hard to rebut. I shall let it be the simple powerful thing that it is.

Tonight instead we turn to Benedict of Nursia, and perhaps briefly the Trappists. As founder of the Benedictine Order, and the primary resource for the rulebook that guides its monks and sisters, Benedict believed that life was best spent in pax et ora et labora. Peace, prayer, and work. A rather mundane practice when taken to the extreme of a monk, to be sure. There are of course plenty of rules before and thereafter in the Rule of Saint Benedict - the Christians of the late Medieval and Renaissance period could hardly contain their need for them, as the ignorant often do, but the 48th chapter of the speaks to me. It calls for its novitiates and members to "live by the work of their hands", and let that be the testament to their faith.

So what are the works of my hands, Will? I have done many, far beyond what you would be familiar with even with all your talented years in law enforcement, and my long years in medical and scholarly pursuits. That is the measure of me by Benedictine code. I am proud of most of it, and exceedingly proud of a rare few. I say most and not all, because I think about the works of my hands in regards to you, and what has grown from those labours.

There were many paths that were set in front of me. Seeing as you are now on a different shore than mine, it seems my route was poorly chosen. I would say I am remorseful, but in truth, I still feel adrift, uncertain. Should I have left you to grow unattended, as you do now? Would you have sprouted, or remained dormant, waiting for a hard winter and warm summer to unfurl? You mask the thoughts you don't wish to share, not even I can entirely predict you. I want things for you, and you only want to be left as you are.

I do dearly wish to see what works you have of your own these days.

But I promised you the Trappists, didn't I? Perhaps some trivia. A group splintered from the Benedictine order, formerly known as the Order of Reformed Cistercians of Our Lady of La Trappe. It would amuse you to hear that the Trappists are hard at work on their works in modern society, for all that they are a relic of the 1600s - which includes a rather industrious beer culture that is quite popular in some circles in the States. I'm told the Trappist beers have a pleasant sour and nutty taste. Modern vices for modern devotions.

The things we learn on the internet are truly marvelous - a community for every subject.

Until next time.

He reads the whole email again, incredulous.

The tone is strange for Hannibal - a little melancholy, but always self-assured with the clarity of purpose. Weighted down, as Beau said. The last bit is playful. There's something hidden in that, Will's certain, but he ignores it in favor of one line that comes to him, over and over again, rumbling like thunder.

I do dearly wish to see what works you have of your own these days.

Will suspects Hannibal would be very pleased with the works of Will's hands, as he is his own. It hurts to think about, wanting to have the moral high ground, but also to have a witness to what he has made himself on this near but distant shore. The works of Will's hands are strange even to him, maybe better left unseen.

(*And what would you say to a man like Hannibal in the reality of the situation? "Check out my sweet new basement, where I found out my capacity to do harm far exceeded even your expectations. Check out how I turned every skill I possessed against the people it was designed to protect and serve justice for. Check out how every skeptic of how my life was going to turn out gets the last laugh, all that work for nothing, because you thought it might be fun to help me see something new and terrible, because you were lonely and desperate for stimulation and understanding, and so was I, and now I am this thing that can blame me just as much as I can blame you."*)

He reads the email a third time, and again still after even that, and laughs.

Hannibal feels adrift? Hannibal feels uncertain? How very Hannibal, to not understand what he wants and what Will wants aren't the same things. How very Hannibal to make plans, and not account for someone else's. How very Hannibal to end months of silence talking about modern vice, and beer, and end it like a session, like they haven't been having a one-sided obvious feud for half a year. How very Hannibal, to politely visit his father in Georgia and not turn down rotten whiskey because that would be rude.

He reads it again, laughing until the laughs are sobs. He just wants someone to close off his hemorrhaging emotions, spilling out. Seal the ventricles, stop the flow, disappear somewhere again where he hasn't killed someone, and where he doesn't need or want validation for it.

When he finally sleeps, he dreams of the stag.

It sleeps as well, under the eaves of the house, at rest, dark as a pool of oil in the shadows of the grass. Its antlers are branching and wide, constantly reaching up from the earth. Much like the bad whiskey, the shoddy house, the ugly boat, it is becoming a comfortable, unhealthy thing.

He rewires the hallway lights - he starts getting in the habit of leaving them on at night. The little lanterns along the stairwell are initially intended for Buster, who has a hard time navigating in the dark as he ages and cataracts make his eyes moon white in bright lights. Will likes that they chase away shadows for him as well.

"Well we all know what happens to people that break into *your* house," says Freddie, sneering from the bottom of the stairwell.

“We do, don’t we?” he mutters, and pets the dogs when he flips the switch to turn them on for the first time. It’s true, it’s not very likely for someone to come into it, but Will is fresh out of convenient holes in the ground.

It’s one of the last of the nice days of summer, and he wants to do something productive. Will plants holly and hydrangea on the slope behind the cottage, lining in concentric rows a long wooden pathway up the hillside, matching it along the eaves of the house. (*“Put your coffee grounds under some of them!” Lori yells when she drives by in the evening one night, teeth and lips stained with wine from the bar. She lives in a duplex on the other side of the hill from you. “It’ll turn some of them red.”*) The rows of their blue heads and shiny waxen leaves are beautiful next to the thorned and sharp variegation of the holly, not yet near fruiting. It’ll be very striking in the snow.

He’s never bothered with things like that. Now he has nothing but time to bother. The house has stood for over a hundred years. He’ll repair it to stand one hundred more, bent but never broken since the 1890s. He admires the bones of his vessel on land, just as he admires his vessel at sea.

A grey day sends him across the river channel with Daisy and the dogs, curling into the estuaries of the Washington side, fish and waterfowl flickering in still pools and deep creeks that wind through the mossy heath. It’s salmon season, and the red flushed Chinook salmon are doing their best to retreat to previous homes they’ve outgrown. Will doesn’t let himself get bothered when Buster fixates on the white-tailed deer at the forest line, retreating into the state park of Cape Disappointment. He’s read there’s a couple lighthouses out there. He’d like to see them someday.

They take their catch back along the bridge, past the mewing gulls and cormorants, back up into their hydrangea and holly lined home, and cook salmon nearly raw.

He has wrought something of his own will onto the surface of the earth in his boat, in his home, and buried it in the remnants of a broken sewage drain. They have grown into this place. This, for all it’s grim truth, is his to keep.

The whiskey bar is a glowing glass jewel box tonight, the greens and golds of its art deco splendor akin to a dragonfly. When the bartender, a younger man with an impressive ginger mustache and tight clipped beard named Rory hands him his drink for the night, he's almost giddy with relief to fall into his usual seat - unusually vacant at this hour of a Friday night. Will supposes tourist season is beginning to come to its end. Maybe he can actually go back to the brewery with Russell before much longer.

It's been a long day, choppy water into the shop and choppy water back. It's not so much bad weather as bad wind blowing out from the Pacific, which normally means weather on its way down from Alaska. Frank complains of arthritic aches. Scow complains from Frank being too arthritic to bend down and scratch him as often as he'd like. Will ends up doing most of the bending over and scratching.

"You're young," grouches Frank. "One day you'll be hiking Saddle Mountain every weekend, and then the next day you'll be telling people about the weather coming in because your shoulder has spoken to you." Will doesn't tell Frank that his shoulder, long since healed from a stab wound and a bullet hole, is perfectly capable of communicating with the atmosphere and getting accurate barometric pressure readings. He just smiles, and moves parts as asked, and dotes on the cat off and on. It's a relief when it's time to go home, and he's docked again for the day.

"I know," he says to the dogs, when he gets home and opens the door. "It's later than it should be. I'm sorry." He takes them around the neighborhood by leash, lingering on the high hillside covered in trees for them to explore. The bridge, standing lit in the encroaching night, is highlighted on its side with twilight blue. It's a nice night to be out.

Holding a Speyside scotch in hand, Will toasts the bowtie-bedecked elk head on the far wall. *To the weekend* , he thinks. Cheers to taking an aspirin for his shoulder, ignoring the imminent arrival of his new bedroom window replacements, and to reading the end of Breakfast of Champions tomorrow on a lazy Saturday.

He drinks a sip, looking down into the snifter. The elk above puts him in the mind of Hobbs again, sitting at camp, listening with his daughter. (*"Hey dad," says a not-Abigail. "There's someone else here."*) He hasn't felt hunted in several months now, which is a harsh contrast to a year before. No, instead he just feels sick, terminal with something dreadful.

Freddie's new home has a polished shine these days, not a single crack to be seen. It's started to feel right with her there even as his mind rebels against it, something foreordained and calm. She only looks irritated with him now at the edges of his vision, a ghost that is slipping away. There's clearly something wrong with him - something written in him that demands blood. He wonders how long he has until he fucks it up. He wonders if Beau struggles with the same fear, trampling every home he knows.

Will leans his head back, and tries to listen.

The couple in the bar corner are having a disagreement - they're supposed to go to her mother's house tomorrow. It's been a month, and she lives in town, and there's really no excuse why you need to go fucking hang out in Seaside when you've been avoiding this for--

Will jerks his head away from them, relaxes again. Counts heartbeats until the heat of someone's orphaned disappointment sinks into his drink. Listens to the man on the phone towards the front, looking out the bar's porthole windows, who shivers against the opening of the front door with a newcomer. "Yeah, things are ok here," says the middle aged man. "Ruth's a good kid, she'll get past this." There's a divorce, Will surmises. Ruth is a good kid, sure, picking sides in custody hearings, and momma won't keep her during the spring or winter break, and he's so goddamn tired of covering for Rachel, she's the one who wanted to have kids and here he is taking all the burden financially for--

He tries not to wince, taking another drink. Will blinks, closes his eyes, and turns his attention back to the bar, where Rory is helping the newcomer from the front door.

"Ah, the Armegnac I think - Francis Darroze if you'd please. A most unusual choice to keep on hand for an establishment dealing in whiskeys. Do you curate the selection here?" Dulcet tones, pointed European diction, a certain flare around the French.

He knows that voice.

No fucking way.

“Yeah, I do! Fancy taste you got there,” Rory says from around the corner of the space. Will can picture his hazel eyes lighting up. “I was starting to think I wouldn’t get to open it - the sales rep said he was really fond of it.”

Just...No. Fucking. Way.

“1975 is a good year,” says the man with the accented voice, a sly smile is sublimated into everything he says. It’s so like the tone of his own monologue these days. It’s a lie to not admit his heart is racing. “You’ve not been led astray.”

Will opens his eyes.

On one hand, if he doesn’t turn his head, this can all be an overactive imagination at work. God knows he has one. He can sink into another person’s quietly exploding tragedy. He doesn’t need to dig his own out of storage, where they have been kept clean, but importantly - contained.

(*“Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.”*)

Will looks back to the bar, and can’t stop the immense pressure of this moment, drawn to a sharp point. It’s almost a relief, like the seconds after the shotgun goes off, and the skin begins to evaluate damage from the scatter. He is riddled with it - he thinks he might pass out or start laughing.

In front of him, dressed in the darkest forest green plaid and a black embossed tie with matching black shirt, Hannibal Lecter stands in front of Will’s chair, gesturing vaguely with a sweep of his hand to its twin behind him. His own snifter glass is wide-mouthed and luminescent with amber spirits. The same intense raptor gaze that Will’s often found disturbing is riveted to him, hot, unblinking, and burning.

“Hello, Will,” says Hannibal, and it’s like they never left the office. His smile is the honest one, albeit that it cuts at both corners. “Is this seat taken?”

“Good evening, Doctor Lecter,” says Will. “No, I suspect you know it’s not.”

Chapter End Notes

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and so begins our story!
All joking aside, I have to thank you all for hanging in there - we finally found the title character.

intermezzo - he that commends me to mine own content, commends me to the thing I cannot get

When Hannibal Lecter is in Florence as a younger man, at the end of his university career and preparing to leave for the eastern seaboard of the United States for a staff position, he buys a bottle of wine.

This part is uninteresting - heavens know every anglophone tourist in Italy does it. “Something to bring home to my father-in law,” says a husband with a habit of slipping off with women half his age - his wife takes them on a trip to *bring the spark back* . “Something to remember the trip by,” says a retiree, who doesn’t drink but will talk extensively of vineyards and rolling hills. “I just love a good red,” says a younger woman, who wouldn’t know the defining characteristics between a burgundy and a chianti if her life literally depended on it.

It is chianti that brings Hannibal to this purchase today. The Visconti family, a distant branch that makes the tree of his own prestigious lineage, is proprietor of the estate that makes this vintage. Hannibal is assured it’s a good year, and from the respectable sommelier that recommends it from a large portfolio of grotto-stone and wood wine racks, he is reasonably assured it will be worth the expense. Anything for family, and all that rot.

“It would be best to let it rest, Signore,” says the sommelier, earnest and careful as he tenders a pinewood box for its trip to the Americas. “Ten years at least, if your tongue can spare the wait.”

Hannibal smiles. New efforts require something to look forward to, and what better than a satisfying conclusion to a prestigious surgery placement in Johns Hopkins Hospital? Of course it is new now, but time ages all things, including wine, and Hannibal has never allowed himself to sit at rest in a world full of different opportunities. The end of the residency will be suitable.

And besides, ten years is a pittance - no one waits as well as Hannibal can wait.

“My tongue doesn’t spare many things, but your chianti, Signore, will have its day,” says Hannibal.

It travels in its box to Baltimore hotel room, to Baltimore Loft, to Baltimore brownstone, moving between modest wine coolers before coming to rest in a climate controlled cellar in the Chandler Square house. Were he not a meticulous housekeeper, he is certain that it would have gathered its fair share of distinguished dust. Hannibal turns it when appropriate, and occasionally checks the cork for rot. The sommelier's recommendation has held up well beyond the ten years advised. He contemplates opening it when he switches his practice from surgery to psychiatry, but the moment never feels entirely right.

Ah well, another time.

But fantastic things are coming into play for Hannibal these days. Twisting pieces into place, watching Will Graham go from a seizing blue-eyed sorrowful boy to a vengeful fury, racing to kill Abel Gideon who even now is drawing closer to Alana Bloom, strikes a particular urgency of his own.

Inspiration is not to be ignored.

When he is well and sure that Will Graham has left in his car, gun in hand, Hannibal goes to the cellar to draw out his Chianti. It's fortunate he will have some time to let it sit and rest when the cork is removed - Will has his car, ergo Hannibal is free to stay at the house after making the appropriate calls.

He is certain that even if he fails to kill Abel Gideon, the honest desire to kill someone is resting just underneath Will's skin, with or without provocation. It rolled so furiously out from his every laboured breath. It is only a matter of revealing the vein to bleed that black humour from.

Hannibal pours the chianti. It has good legs. He's glad he's waited.

So plays out a moment from beyond Hannibal's current reality. He can think of it fondly in hindsight.

(*You are about to learn that you are not as patient as you supposed, in Italy all those years ago. Maybe even further back, to Soviet unkindnesses and the relentless driving need for retribution, if you could only wait long enough to deliver it in its own time.*)

Hannibal meets one time with Jack Crawford following Will's departure from the hospital, a week after, in fact. As mutually spurned co-conspirators with the man in question, it falls to them to clarify if the other has been successful in their endeavors to get in contact with Will. It is only convenient to do it when Hannibal himself is in for an interview, again under the lens of Crawford's suspicion. Miriam Lass passes him over - it is all he can do to not smile as he passes the one-way window and Alana as she excuses him from the room.

"Doctor Lecter, thank you for travelling all this way for that interview with Miriam. I apologize - we had to exclude you from the suspects as your name had been thrown into the ring by others involved in the case." Jack looks pained. "As we saw, it was without merit."

(*It is with substantial merit, but you can allow someone else a moment in the sun. Frederick Chilton is any day now ready for all the press and attention he has desired. It's only right - he took something of yours, and waved it in your face.*)

"Hopefully we can put this ugliness behind us, Jack," he says, straightening his tie pin with a stray hand. "You, me, and Will alike."

Jack winces. "Will doesn't seem to be in the forgiving spirit at the moment."

"Justifiably," says Hannibal, giving a half-smile. "He's gone from high-security cell to exonerated after a substantial passage of time. I'm sure it all feels very alien," he adds. "He doesn't strike me as the type to embrace institutionalization, but it was probably the most consistent routine he's had for many years." Barring his and Will's talks. Barring his and Will's confidences. Barring episodes of triggered seizures where Hannibal watches Will as one watches a meteor - stricken, even as he is not harmed by the light.

“Well let him know he’s always needed, if you see him,” huffs Jack, scratching the back of his neck with a wide palm. “I think my welcome is worn out at the house.”

Hannibal might tell Will when he does. It’s so much more interesting when the scene has many players, painted and dressed in their finest, and Will is due for his costume change.

At first, he doesn’t understand.

Some context:

Hannibal, as any self-respecting and self-fulfilled man with a reputation to uphold does, keeps a studious keyword search alert for his name. One never knows when they must be defended from hearsay as a doctor and philanthropist, and Hannibal has always been of a mind to solve issues of the like himself. If they are unreasonable, well, that is what the hefty yearly retainer for his lawyer is for.

He also keeps this practice up for other things of interest - primarily the Chesapeake Ripper, his reluctantly accepted epithet that he has learned to wear like a badge of honor. (*How trite, you think at first. How unoriginal, but also, how flatteringly timeless.*) Included also are close friends and acquaintances - Murasaki Lecter, Will Graham, Jack Crawford, and Alana Bloom. If there is something pertaining to them - work places, addresses, lovers, he likes to know about them. It makes for marvelous conversation. He likes that it unsettles them that he knows about things like that before they can tell him. In Will’s case, it has often helped him gain the advantage of time to protect Will from the discovery of such news alone, or spin the narrative as Ariadne at the loom.

On a fairly uninteresting Wednesday, he gets an alarming influx of notifications - all of which centered on Will’s home address. At first, Hannibal has a moment of flashing concern - hopefully Will is well. Alana has said that he is there, with the dogs. It’s unthinkable that something has happened to him that Hannibal did not first orchestrate. (*You are a capricious and jealous god.*)

At second glance, it is all property listing notifications, and that's when the wheels truly start to turn. Will's provincial white farmhouse sits in repose, listed at a modest price.

Short Sale , reads the property description. ***Mid 1930s cottage style farmhouse in the Wolf Trap countryside. 3 acres of surrounding land, and updated plumbing and electric. Generous 2 bedroom, 2 bathroom floor plan with several tree-lined views, and an open kitchen with easy access to the front veranda of the house and living room for al fresco entertaining. As-is listing, accepting all offers, buyer is responsible for all inspections, termite, and repairs. Won't last long, contact Realtor Rafael David Kellerman to book a showing.***

A rather ridiculous looking man's headshot sits in the corner, proudly declaring him the ***Seller's Agent*** .

Hannibal reads it again, chin perched at the top of his hand. The house continues to be present on the tablet screen, very much for sale. It is almost unconscionable.

Will is moving. He tastes that, rolls it in his mouth, brings his tongue over the front of his teeth, and grits down. It is bitter, but unusual. It is unusual in that it is unusually abrupt for Will Graham, a consummate man of the familiar when faced with instability, would sell his one refuge.

But the more important questions - where is he going? And what for? Other than the occasional missive texted and beseeched via voicemail from Alana, Hannibal himself has not reached out to Will. He was not merely speaking pleasantries with Jack - a man like Will needs to realign his latitudes after so long in the forced company of the mentally ill. He just did not anticipate quite so literal a need for different latitudes.

"Did you see this?" says Alana, later in the evening and entirely aghast. She is scrolling through listing photos on his tablet, still dressed for lectures, and holding a tulip glass of framboise with fingers pinched tight enough to whiten. "This is so unlike him. It's the only thing he really was proud of when he moved out to Virginia after finishing his masters at George Washington."

Fortunately, Hannibal knows just the man to call. Byron Metcalfe, his attorney, will ensure that something good comes of this, and really, the cost of the house is a pittance in the pursuit

of answers and in service of a friend. Will had always lived by modest means, even in his well-kept home was merely a stop between other somewheres - the least Hannibal can do is try to hold onto this piece of restful country for him until he returns to his senses. And if it puts Will back into his sphere of influence, then really, it's hardly a loss at all.

(*It's not expensive, but it is an expense. Do you think you'll know when to stop? You so rarely are capable of peacefully letting things go. You have painted the countryside red with the surety of that.*)

Following Will's absence from Baltimore State and the listing of his house, it doesn't take long for Miss Lounds to begin sniffing around and triggering some notifications of Hannibal's own. A series of articles follow on Tattlecrime with pictures of the vacant property. It's almost endearingly flattering and unkind in equal measure to the subject of said article.

Will Graham Gets the Hell Out of Dodge: Avoiding the Truth, or FBI Cover-Up?

Posted by Freddie Lounds, Admin

In a story that just gets weirder and weirder, news is out that Will Graham has been released from the BSHCI, following the reveal of the Chesapeake Ripper's involvement in the copycat murders that would put Graham in criminal medical incarceration for months. While that would normally pull no special attention, it has come to Tattlecrime's attention that Graham's house in Wolf Trap has been listed for immediate sale. We took a look for ourselves, and sure enough, the house was empty of any signs of its owner.

So, dear readers, it begs the question: is Graham taking advantage of an unexpected windfall and abandoning the Virginia countryside before his involvement in the case can be called into question a second time? The Wolf Trap house is one of the last locations that remains of Abigail Hobbs were found at, and like our local Baltimore figure Edgar Allen Poe once wrote on, you never know what's under the floorboards. Will Graham has always been notably evasive in his responses, even when in direct conversations with Tattlecrime.

But alternatively, is the FBI making Will Graham disappear? With a decline in case closures, a new cycle of Chesapeake Ripper murders, and an ugly scandal surrounding the deliberate arrest and trial of Graham via kangaroo court, there's no better time for the FBI to have Graham off the map. When asked, the head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit and boss to Will Graham, Jack Crawford, was totally unhelpful and cryptic in explaining where his previously star profiler might have gone. "Gone fishing, apparently," Crawford was reported to have said.

Not to worry, readers - we'll be prepared to do some fishing ourselves. The fate of the house itself appears to be sealed, even if we do not yet know Graham's. On our most recent search, the property was marked as pending sale, but taking backup offers. We speculate there are lots of weirdos out there with money to burn looking for the rest of Abigail Hobbs.

Click the link below to see Will Graham's last known residence in detail!

A series of photos taken hastily by camera phone follow, rather than the proper listing for the property, but they capture a rather different character than the fancifully oversaturated and softened ones designed to attract homemakers. Hannibal himself has not been to the house yet, but the pictures online speak of an uncomfortable absence. Freddie must have arranged a showing shortly after the property listed, but before Byron was able to get in contact with a sales contract. A missive sent directly to Will went unanswered, as all things have, Hannibal included.

(*Your own email, recently composed over several days, is short and biting with gentle teeth. The silence that follows after makes you want to take retribution in clenched ones instead. You're hard pressed to acknowledge you feel disappointed - stood up. That's for other people, not you.*)

It becomes clearer that things will not resolve simply when an update from Hannibal's lawyer comes to him.

"Final signing papers came from a notary in Boise, Idaho," says Byron, his usual drawl very satisfied. "Escrow is to be paid out to a trust fund that's managed by a buddy of mine, but he

didn’t seem to know much about Graham when we chatted this morning other than he seemed kind of reserved. Can’t tell you much about who has access to the fund though, only that it’s probably new. I know we had hoped to get Graham to meet in person for the closing, but at least we know what side of the universe he’s on.”

So he truly has gone somewhere else - not beyond Hannibal’s reach, he is quite certain that nothing but death is beyond him, but far enough for Hannibal to contemplate what the final intent is. To be anywhere but here, of course. But where he is willing to plant his feet is a very difficult question. Hannibal can picture Will anywhere.

(*You have often pictured him everywhere, with you* .)

“I am very grateful for your assistance with this matter, Byron. It’s unfortunate that Mr. Graham couldn’t be here to see it through himself, but from the sounds of it, he has other things to see. Perhaps we will keep it as it until he has an interest in looking backwards to the east coast again.”

“So hold the property for you in the Sforza trust or the Lecter one?”

“The Sforza, I think for now,” replies Hannibal, chasing off disappointment with action. It’s not a closed opportunity for reunification, but certainly not a probable one. “No rentals, please. It’s very disconcerting when strangers are in your home.” He smiles. The comment tastes of kidney and pastry.

He makes shepherd’s pie later, served with claret, and thinks himself quite funny even as Alana brings a grateful forkful to her red mouth, but with no one that can appreciate the joke, it’s just a meal. Dissatisfaction with the day's outcome sours the wine.

The next day calls for using his next practical resource for information on Will Graham, now that he has sussed out a small part of his intentions, and can take the house no further. That is a snare for another time perhaps.

Hannibal resolves instead to use his extensive reputation in the medical community to see how Will's health is. He is very familiar with Will's time in Johns Hopkins, as well as the evaluations conducted by Doctor Sutcliffe. In another time before Will has started turning Frederick Chilton's attention to him, he would have likely also been able to get the routine vital reports taken at Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He helped evaluate the protocols changed for the hospital in the last decade as part of a fellows program - he knows exactly what should be on each.

Frederick is indisposed with his own problems currently (*of your making, but let's not split hairs over minor details*) - he will have to search elsewhere.

He will have to return to the Johns Hopkins files, which he has a notarized copy of, courtesy of Will following his insistence on leaving the hospital early. From the records he recalls a name, a primary care physician. ***A. Schroeder, Internal Medicine, Arlington Medical Group.***

When he initially calls the medical office, he is waving his banner of legal compliance - a medical information waiver, gained in service of helping Will schedule and assess his appointment with the late Doctor Donald Sutcliffe. (*"I don't really know what to do with neurology," Will has said to you, red eyed and tired. "Which is funny, seeing as I'm neurotic." You had shared a laugh over that.*) He forwards it before requesting a call with the attending physician, the mysterious Doctor Schroeder of Internal Medicine, from their immunology practice. It is ironic that Will was likely assigned to her from a clinic rotation - it's unlikely he would have seen an immunologist of his own free will before critically needing one. It's the great irony of immunology - it is often too late to recognize the body destroying itself instead of a foreign invader.

He recognizes her to be German by her slight accent and somewhat blunt manner of speaking, but her diction is impeccable. As a doctor, he appreciates the Deutsche efficiency and lack of obfustication. A thing is a thing is a thing, and no matter how carefully created the metaphor, it's easily rendered to its most base components for consumption and understanding.

It is easy initially - she is receptive to his desire to understand Will's current state of health, thinking perhaps he is making certain that his drug schedule does not interrupt hers. It is not uncommon between the disciplines, and respectfully seen as being the courteous thing to do. Hannibal has had many conversations like this.

(*You are good at getting your preferred outcome. A kind word goes a long way to ensure it, and you are among the best with your language across seven varied countries and cultures.*)

When Hannibal begins to realize that she is not going to share more than the drug schedule, he begins to see that this may be a difficult lead after all. He is further aghast at the drug schedule that *has* been recommended. Will Graham is no schizophrenic. Will Graham does not require a schizophrenic's medication. He doesn't bother to hide his disdain for the decision.

"I am sorry to say I can't share the specifics behind his lab panels and most recent vitals and statistics without a new form," she says, tinny and sharp over the phone. "The medical group doesn't share without our own release form being used - a bureaucratic mess, but I am required to comply."

"No trouble at all," he replies, but finds himself unclenching a fist on the surface of his desk. "If you can forward that to my office, I would be very obliged. One has to go through the proper channels after all. May I ask that we set aside a time to speak at your offices later in the week?" he asks. Maybe there is more to be had in the flesh, some document or report to go missing. There really is nothing like seeing a thing in person.

"Don't worry about the drive," he adds, when she asks if another phone call wouldn't be more convenient for him. "I find I quite like the roads between Baltimore and Virginia. I'm in the process of finalizing a house purchase there even as we speak."

A few days later, the appointed time of his in-person meeting arrives. Doctor Analiese Schroeder is a very fine featured, very tall woman of squared jaw and long neck, curt as is the way of most Germans Hannibal has encountered in his lifetime. She is what he expected.

"So you, by its literal definition and purpose, don't have HIPAA clearance to see Will Graham's medical records with our practice," she starts, when Hannibal is given permission to enter by a very green at the gills secretary.

A complication, not expected. So it is to be *that* kind of meeting, he supposes.

Hannibal smiles, trenchcoat pulled over his arm. He has chosen a grey sweater and marigold yellow tie to offset his black suit jacket's fine threading of brown plaid. Most people find the tie distracting against the palette of neutrals, eyes pulling away from his face where he shrewdly watches. It is one of the best ways to read people he hasn't yet made the acquaintance of, chalked up to eccentricity rather than artfulness. However, Doctor Schroeder is stony faced, looking straight forward. He reads in the morning before his visit that she is from East Berlin - "extraordinarily focused," says a colleague from the University of Hamburg.

"Good morning, Doctor Schroeder," he blithely pushes on, smiling. "Perhaps we should start at the beginning of this tale, though I do appreciate your forthright attitude. One would hate to bury the lede."

"Very little lede to bury, Doctor Lecter," she says, pushing a manila folder from one side of her desk to the other - perfectly aligned to a notepad and shiny new smartphone. Everything is colorless save the light brown of the patient folders. "I've been informed that you've had your permissions revoked to access Will's Graham's new medical records starting back at his...tenancy at Baltimore State. Your consent form is not useful here."

"Will Graham and I have something of an understanding. Circumstances have changed since Doctor Chilton took over his therapy. Doctor Chilton is...indisposed, and per your own recommended course of pharmaceutical treatment for Will's encephalitic sequelae, it would be best for him to resume regular psychiatric appointments."

Hannibal is not uncomfortable with lies. They are best buried in truths.

Doctor Schroeder seems to have a good nose for lies. Her sharp eyes don't cut down to Hannibal's tie, or stray to the desk. He feels the edges of him being measured. The only thing betraying her thought is one index finger tapping the top of a ballpoint pen - some shabby cheap thing, promotional from a dialysis clinic that leaves small smudges of ink on her fingers. It is here, so she uses it. Hannibal can appreciate that kind of practicality. He has built an entire portfolio of work on it as the copycat. (*You hate calling it as such - they are original derivative works, not some poor imitation. Better. Brighter contrast, fewer mistakes.*)

“So you said over the phone,” she deadpans. “Doctor Lecter, I fail to see why we’re having this conversation. Doctor Chilton’s absence doesn’t transfer authority back to you - Will Graham isn’t committed any longer, and the State doesn’t get to mandate psychiatric treatment. He has told me plainly not to communicate his treatment by our group to you.”

Told her plainly? “At the beginning of your acquaintance?”

“No, a couple of days ago by email. It was phrased *very* specifically in regards to you.”

An email. How curious. That’s a development that Hannibal can feel shining out of this conversation, a shiny coin in the sand. Other than the ridiculous realtor, there’s been nothing to indicate Will has been anything other than as solitary as John the Baptist in the wilderness, mentally beyond the missives of an intrusive communication obsessed society.

Hannibal turns his palms up, nodding towards her. “Then it seems I must defer to you. Perhaps we can move forward simply then - less in regards to Will, and more as a consultation on the efficacy of clozapine. Generally if we must - I would hate to cross a boundary for you.”

Doctor Schroeder begins to frown, unhappy. “Doctor Lecter, I understand your position on this, but I am not allowed to-”

Hannibal raises a hand. “Hear me out, if you will,” he says lightly. “Will Graham is not schizophrenic, though his neurology may occasionally light up the same areas mapped in the brain. He has an empathy disorder, more akin to hypersensitivity than neural malfunction. We all have a mind’s eye. He keeps his wide open.” (*And what lovely eyes he has.*)

“If he is experiencing hallucinations, auditory or otherwise, something with a less rigorous dosage schedule would be best,” he pushes on. “It would be like using a hammer for something that only requires a soft touch, and Will is hardly known for his steadfast schedule or sober diet that would mark improvements in his overall health.”

“Doctor Lecter, you are obviously the expert in regards to most psychiatric drug schedules, but it has been a full quarter of a year since you were last able to see Will Graham, and half a year almost since you officially assessed his health and didn’t see fit to medicate him. Tell me, what is the primary reason that clozapine is recommended?”

“Failed efficacy in standard treatments,” says Hannibal, easy as a spring rain. He is, in all things, somewhat knowledgeable, but in his medical training immaculate. “It is terrible in conjunction with immunosuppressants, inhibiting white blood cell production and weakening the cardiovascular system. An errant wind could likely blow him over, or a slightly unwashed leaf of lettuce make him ill.”

“That is often the case and the side effects are unpleasant, but it’s also advised for high-suicide risk antipsychotic care.” She’s very distant and cold-looking now, some unknowable landscape from another time. He admires her immensely, even as he is annoyed by the featureless wall that she represents, something insurmountable. “When Mr. Graham came to the office for his examination, I saw a very thin, very hunted person that has had a very inconsistent course of treatments between you, who provided next to no known pharmaceutical care and only a letter of recommendation, to Doctor Chilton who appears to have used the entire cabinet of standard options. This is all things you know. I am capable of reading the charts too,” she adds, a little scathing. “It’s why we make records to begin with - for clarity for others that come behind. If you have had so much input on Mr. Graham’s medical decisions despite advising he was mentally fit for field duty, it is a wonder that you would not have kept him as a proper patient.”

(*Snide, condescending woman, you will fill the cavity of her skull with charts, if that is what she insists she has.*)

“So no, he is not historically schizophrenic, but he is unresponsive to most of the common solutions that Doctor Chilton tried.” She pulls the manila file forward, flipping it open. He sees tidy, square-blocked notes for intake forms, a scribbling of math for dosage calculations. As regimented as a military - he covets them. (*You could take them.*) “I was advised by another colleague that this was a viable course to take. I was not convinced, with his hypersensitivity as you say and his lack of any emergency contacts, that he would still be around to try something else. It is perhaps heavy-handed, but it is something that makes sense.”

“If that is your concern, then a voluntary in-patient facility would have been the responsible course to ensure he doesn’t fall dead from a seasonal cold.”

She raises a brow. “Do caged birds often fly back into cages when released to the trees?”

Hannibal smiles, slow and sly. “Domesticated ones,” he says.

He is summarily dismissed from the office not long after, and he is relieved to quit his acquaintance of Analiese Schroeder. (*“Please expect me to report this,” she says. “It is entirely inappropriate to use old consent forms to access new patient information. You can request the unreachable Mr. Graham to book an appointment and get that information just as the rest of us must.” Another accidental kernel of knowledge - Will does not share where he is or how best to reach him even with active professional contacts.*)

He drives himself to Wolf Trap. Getting the scent of the quarry helps find it. The white farmhouse is as he remembers it, but it is as hollow as a church. He thinks it’s Will’s absence that he would feel the most, but truly the absence of the dogs is the most glaring.

Will’s most treasured possession and family, loved and loving in the way that only animals can. Alana is grieved by the news of their new homes, and tells him that she visits the ones on the neighboring farm, who are as happy and stupid as can be. (*“I would have taken them with me,” she says from around a tearful look, “but I think Will put them with the best possible home for them. It’s cruel to move them again.”*) Even Hannibal is startled by Will’s impulsive decision to send them away - cutting ties is common in suicidal people, relieving them of the obligation of attachment to others.

(*You will not be cut away so easily.*)

In this, Hannibal can admit the cold gaze of Doctor Schroeder had perhaps been shrewd. At first it rankles him. Will Graham, suicidal? A vibrant emotive creature like him? How very pedestrian a thought. “Oh poor sensitive Will,” the thoughtless masses say. “Handle with care, very fragile!” Hannibal is appalled at the suggestion.

However, the picture Jack Crawford paints of Will on his release day was one of withdrawal. Hannibal has it on good authority that he took a cab home instead of asking for assistance, and had thrown out a bundle of prescriptions Frederick had advised on his way out the door.

Dear Frederick, always trying to cut in where he's not needed. How any person could think they understand how best to treat Will Graham over him is hilarious. Of course he knows the right course of action - he has engineered the method of his illness, and now, ready to move to the next set of their stage, can fix him.

The problem is that Will isn't actually here any longer to fix. The sensation is not unlike misplacing a valuable item, something important regardless of utility or beauty. The longer Hannibal spends at the house, the more obvious he is gone. Without the odor of dog, engine oil, whiskey, and fever, the house is as any other on the long country road.

It is late at night when he finds himself writing a missive again to Will. The more he thinks on the medications, the more he finds himself frustrated. Will is a man trending towards a functioning alcoholic at his worst, and always terrible self-care habits. Expecting him to not accidentally destroy himself on more minor hurts in the name of evading suicide like a bogeyman in the night is patently ridiculous.

He has never received a reply from his first, but in hindsight, Hannibal can re-read it and see it for the arrogant business-like missive that it was. It is an easily overlooked trespass. He should expect to provide some leniency if he is to also receive it. He and Will are beyond businesslike.

Here is how unprofessional they are:

Hannibal has held his throat open to push an esophageal tube down it. Hannibal has glided reverent fingers over the trembling lashes of Will's eyelids mid-seizure, smelling his fever like smoke in peat-moss. (*Even now the sensation tightens your throat, tickles the skin of your fingertips* .) In Minnesota, Hannibal had applied pressure to the bullet wound from Jack with bare hands, feeling the heat and pressure of Will's blood pouring over, wasted but vibrant to meet Abigail's. Together at last, as blood kin of a different sort.

Will has drank late at night in his home, has prayed for understanding of his streak of vengeance. (*You understand it. It's painful how well you understand it.*) Will has called into question the validity of all of Hannibal's relationships. (*This is not entirely accurate, self-diagnosed as well as third-party professionally diagnosed sociopathy or not - you are friends with everyone you consider a friend, and mean well for them, until such a time it's more entertaining to take a different route. You would be happy to lend someone twenty-thousand dollars, and you would be happy to remove their lateral, anterior, and jugulo-digastric lymph nodes to serve as oysters while they were conscious if they double-crossed you. All's fair in that regard.*) Will has set a besotted man onto his path with the intention to kill him, robbed of his own ability to lay hands on him.

Judging from his conversation with Doctor Schroeder, however, Will is not ready for the intimacy of an honest conversation. He is barely ready for communication.

But he must say something, so today it will be medical advice, that he may live long enough to talk on another late night and share secrets. At home in his office, Hannibal attaches the removable keyboard to his tablet, stretching his fingers as he would before playing harpsichord.

From: hlecter@johnshopkins.edu

To: wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org

Subject: A word of caution

It seems that I have overstepped my bounds with Dr. Schroeder, and in turn with your medical consent. You'll be most pleased to hear she has filed...

And on it goes, until Hannibal can only send it and hope it's read.

An excerpt:

The American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics, A.5.c. - Sexual and/or Romantic Relationships with Former Clients

"Sexual and/or romantic counselor– client interactions or relationships with former clients, their romantic partners, or their family members are prohibited for a period of 5 years following the last professional contact. This prohibition applies to both in-person and electronic interactions or relationships.

Counselors, before engaging in sexual and/or romantic interactions or relationships with former clients, their romantic partners, or their family members, demonstrate forethought and document (in written form) whether the interaction or relationship can be viewed as exploitive in any way and/or whether there is still potential to harm the former client."

Hannibal has never been particularly vulnerable to the vices of relationships. He is aloof with most liaisons, dodging expectations: long-term commitments, marriage, children, things that are desirable to most, but speak of dullness to him. Prior to the last year, he would never have thought of taking a patient or their family as a lover - it's akin to bedding the sheep as the shepherd. (*No one is really on your level. Is there ever such a thing as equal, informed consent when your imaginings and instruction are so far beyond the wealthy neurotic that you often service?*)

The five year exclusionary period feels arbitrary. How long does it take for someone to safely be beyond influencing someone unduly? At what point can the healers of minds set their duties aside, and feel comfortable in the knowledge that they aren't harming their patients, their moral obligations fulfilled and now free to pursue their game. "Surely this person has cast me aside in their thoughts as a figure of stability. Surely they no longer think of me." At what point in the chronology does that occur? Never, he thinks.

It's comforting. Will, no matter that he is outside reasonable contact now, will likely never shake the experience of Hannibal digging in his head. But Will is not a simple sheep, and for the first time in his long career as surgeon and psychiatrist alike, he finds himself wondering if he has pursued the wrong path with him.

"Penny for your thoughts?" says Alana. "You've got that brooding look again, like something's stuck in your craw." He admires her searching gaze, as he often has in passing.

Today she is tired, just the slightest of makeup creasing at the corners, a natural beauty unnaturally painted. She has glittering blue irises, icy where Will's are (*were, don't you think?*) dark and varying. A pretty Saint Lucia, without the sense to pluck out her own eyes yet to protect her virtue.

Hannibal shifts on the settee, considering the book in hand and shifting towards her. "There's not many things I can't swallow," he says. "But textbooks make for dry reading. I was musing on ethics."

She smiles, turning her glass in hand, full of a Flemish sour beer. He's clarified it in part with collagens from Abel Gideon, quite inspired by his haggard appearance akin to a late Rembrandt. He had a particular gestalt. "Brushing up on something? I have a copy of my own, but it's not the most entertaining read." She takes a long draught - and Hannibal, still as a raptor, watches. "Probably should brush up on it myself."

"Arguably, we are double marked for violations in regards to patient relationships. Can you not guess why?"

Alana frowns - Hannibal has to watch closely, caught between thinking it is guilt and it is some kind of frustration skittering between her brows. But her response is thoughtful. "Will had a small support system of a few people. Two out of three are in a relationship, damaging his perception of us as supportive of him instead of each other. The third is dead, if Beverly counted. If the third is Jack, he wasn't really supportive."

"Miss Katz was among the few that spoke with him during his incarceration. I am sure, for all that it was a small thing, Will would have considered her such. Ripples in a small pool are more akin to wakes." Hannibal turns to the fireplace, smooth faced. "Why exclude Jack from your criteria? He arguably spent the most time with Will."

"For all the good it did him," Alana huffs a little, curling shoeless feet under her legs and onto the cushions. A normal comfortable thing, Hannibal reminds himself. A normal thing that is expected of an occasional live-in partner.

"Calling him support is laughable," she continues. "Do you know what he told me the other day? The entire thing wouldn't be happening if it weren't for Will being so difficult. Like he wouldn't have gone off the deep end when he was suffering from a disease if he could just

push through, while everyone was just...predisposed to say he was unbalanced. Should he have been more cheerful about it? Maybe send thank you notes after leaving the hospital to congratulate everyone on wrapping up the copycat murders, sorry you all thought I was a psychopath?" she snorts.

"Jack is pushing through life as well, with a terminally ill wife and a bad reputation now that his team has been outed as wrong in their analysis." Hannibal gestures, and makes to grab for his small glass of icewine. (*You relish it - the sweet drink, and the outing.*) "Everyone you meet is suffering something. Do we excuse every trespass?"

"We excuse people for having emotions," she rebuffs. "I understood Will's desire to be left alone - it's self-preservation. I don't know what he's doing now, but it's arguably still self-preservation. My tolerance for his trespasses has grown."

"Even Matthew Brown?" he prods.

"Maybe not that one," she sighs, disappointed.

Poor Alana Bloom. Perhaps Will would have been served well by someone that could stay on the outside like her. She was an excellent student, and is an excellent therapist. (*Mostly to children and damaged women - how Will would take offense to his fellows.*) So committed to the ethics of her calling that she declined to serve him as healer, unable to resolve to casting off Will as a partner even if she would have preferred the patient. Five years is a long time to commit to the aloofness that Hannibal finds effortless.

Hannibal has no such reservations. He does as he likes - he is an influence no matter what, so why trouble himself with literature written by bureaucrats, arbitrary time frames and understanding that they are?

"Do we have to always come back to this?" she asks, after the long silence begins to chafe her. He watches her mouth twist in a moeu of displeasure, favoring the end of a strand of hair, twisting it. A nervous childish habit. Hannibal wonders if she's tired of the subject, or worried they have no more in common than it. She's always her most honest while drinking.

Dr. Bloom enjoys her self-flagellation, he suspects. Her retrospection is constant and unforgiving, and Hannibal looks on as she fails to let go and enjoy the moment, the challenge of the conversation.

“Of course not, my dear,” he says.

(*But yes, you do* .)

A weekday finds him in the Quantico FBI Academy and the Brutalist architecture that Hannibal disdains. It’s resemblance to the Soviet buildings of his early upbringing is distasteful - it is only one badly painted mural of the happy masses shy of being at home in Minsk. (*You have been many times, stopping on the border of Lithuania, contemplating if you really do want to go home this time when you come to renew legal claims on the family estate. You didn’t. You don’t.*)

Alana is lecturing, and he has intentions of dinner and a show tonight, which he graciously offers to drive to. A production of La Gioconda is the work of the Lyric Opera House’s week, and Hannibal has neglected his social callings for too long amidst all the drama of the past months.

The lecture halls and offices aren’t particularly policed the way that the halls of the J. Edgar Hoover Building are in DC proper. (*A building uglier still than Quantico - with the backdrop of the Smithsonian and doric pillars of the National Archives, you can think of no greater disappointing juxtaposition wrought in concrete this side of the Baltic Sea.*) Hannibal drifts between unremarkable hallways with linoleum floors and cork boards, observing the detritus of the school’s student body - there apparently was a potluck for a Professor George Durham in Drug Enforcement’s retirement, printed on a neon blue paper, a training seminar next week for sexual harassment situations, and someone is selling their Ford Mustang before a deployment in the Middle East. No different from any other college campus, save this one trains in lethal de-escalation and hostage negotiation. Perhaps in that order, Hannibal thinks with a twist of his mouth.

He heads to the familiar door of Will’s office - left unlocked and largely empty. Will always had spartan tastes in his office, more inclined to dwell in his head or in his lecture hall than in

his workspace. A utilitarian laminate desk with a swing-arm lamp takes up the majority of the small office, where a small pile of letters and folders have taken up residence, and one larger box.

“Just leave it on his desk,” they say. “He’ll look at it when he comes back in.” “Do we know when that is?” “Surely soon.”

The walls are mostly bare - Hannibal has noted in the past where a trio of small framed photos hang in a tall line next to the door, the only real place to look from the desk, but as neither of them were inclined to spend much time there, he has not paid them much notice. He does so now. They are still there, in fading film. Something printed at the drug store from a disposable camera.

An older gentleman and a young Will - by the dark blue-green eyes and intense gaze, Hannibal surmises this is Will’s father. Two of the triad are of them together, one from Will’s graduation from the police academy, and another at his master’s degree convocation ceremony.

In the first, the great crescent of the New Orleans police insignia hangs scythe-like from the badge on the front of his uniform. Will is a very comely youth, with a smooth face and the boyish smile that Hannibal has only seen a handful of times. His hair is clipped close to his head - a tracery of veins at his temples are blue, and Hannibal marvels at them. The elder Graham does not seem the type to smile, with a hard grim mouth, but his eyes are bright and creased with some private joy - how successful his son is, how wonderful this product of fate he has been given.

The second marks a very changed Will. Hannibal knows him to have retired from the police force following an interview gone awry during his detective days in Homicide. (*You are surprised to learn he was stabbed when checked into the hospital following his seizure in front of Alana Bloom’s house. You had voraciously gone over his intake information on the door of the hospital room and read it glaring from the paper* - **healed stab wound in right shoulder, do not rest on right side** .) In this short instance, Will is beginning to look like the man Hannibal knows, an embittered man that is battered in some way by every person’s existence. He can’t really help it - with age comes understanding that his childhood wouldn’t have suffered. Imitation has long transitioned into oracular knowledge from his sensitivity. The younger and elder Graham begin to look more alike, though Will’s rounded eyes and soft curling hair mark him for his mother’s child in a small, permanent way.

The third has no obvious focus, just a picture of an old blue shotgun house with wrought-iron curling trellis on either side of the concrete porch stoop, and were it not for the same unremarkable film that the other two were made from, he would think it something random picked up at a thrift store. Big heavy red day lilies and purple irises decorate the side of the house like bruises. But this is taken with purpose - Hannibal wonders if it's a previous home of the wandering Grahams, or maybe a relatives' house. If this were months back, he would have asked Will. It's intriguingly vague.

Hannibal turns his focus back to the desk and the pile of paperwork slowly ageing. Some letters have postmarks dating back to January, when it was expected he would return. After all, not guilty surely means fit for return to work. In another time, Hannibal suspects Will would have done exactly that, mooring himself on routine.

It's the box that actually ends up catching his eye, yellow tape sealing the sides. ***Return to Quantico - Room 1136, Prof. Will Graham*** . The standard, generic whiteness of it is what gives it away - it's a released evidence box.

Pulling a slim pocket knife from his waistcoat (*it's never wrong to be prepared*), Hannibal promptly cuts the yellow tape. The lid squeaks when it's lifted, and Hannibal turns to the office door, still for a moment, but there's no one near to hear it. It is very like Will to choose an office far from the crowds.

There's a small amount of correspondence in plastic ziplocs (*mostly post-its of random thoughts - you pocket them*), and photos upon photos of crime scenes that Will has used as talking points for his projector in class. There is a noticeable absence of photos from Garrett Jacob Hobbs and the copycat murders. Presumably these will rot in the basement of the J. Edgar Hoover Building until the end of the nation. What is beneath these is the actual lode.

Will's faculty laptop, a lightweight and nondescript grey, scratched at the corners from his lack of a protective case and insistence on throwing it into his satchel with the rest of his belongings. He has not taken it with him, wherever he is.

(*Take it. You've taken everything else he's left behind, why not this?*)

He does. It fits very nicely in his own leather bag, slung over his shoulder.

When Alana meets him in the lobby looking harried but grateful, Hannibal smiles brightly.

“I hope you didn’t wait too long,” she apologizes. “I know you’ve been looking forward to tonight, but the question segment ran long. There’s a trainee that really likes to dig in, and I’d hate to discourage her. There’s so few women in the program.”

“Nonsense,” he says. “I had a great time taking in the views of the countryside and training course. Did you know they have a bed of irises on the west side of the building? Quite lovely,” he adds. “And now to other lovelier things.” He kisses the side of her wrist, and pays her no closer attention other than to listen on the way back to Baltimore.

From the dim lights of the Lyric Opera House, the stage is a riot of red and Madonna blue, headdresses and costumes sparkling. Gioconda is wretched in her misery, lashing out at faithless and spurned Enzo. Prepared for death, no matter the damnation, a better fate than given to the program’s villain.

Alas, wretched me! What do I wish?

To give you back sun and life,

Endless freedom,

Joy and the future,

The smile of ecstasy,

The sigh of rapture,

Love ... paradise!

(Almighty God! Let me die!)

Hannibal is unsettled for the duration of the fourth act of the performance, for all that the talent is excellent and Alana is a vision of emerald to his right, smartly avoiding touching him. (*She knows you do not abide distraction during a performance - it would be rude to*

listen with anything but a full ear, and your literal mother-tongue of Italian curling like vines in your head towards your warmest center.) He is usually able to easily compartmentalize the multiple trains of thought he is conducting - not so tonight.

He is too excited by other pursuits to enjoy the current moment, but Gioconda sings on.

Well then, speed to your tryst, sad and faithful hero!

In the trunk of the Bentley within his satchel, Will Graham's laptop lies inert but filled with promise.

intermezzo - i to the world am like a drop of water, that in the ocean seeks another drop

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hannibal sleeps that night, he dreams.

Normally, this is no cause for concern. Hannibal has a vast memory, so structured and clean that he can see it during waking hours as well as slumber with little disruption. He is known to walk plazas, and steppes, and cities in the scant time he spends unconscious, holding court like a lord in his own domain. On rare occasions, dreams flow like the nonsensical filter that science indicates it is designed to be. On rarer occasions, his discipline fails and the random intertwines with unwanted memories.

This is unwanted.

The turrets of the Lecter Castle are sharp peaks in the highland trees of Aukštaitija, elms and spruce darkening the forest floor to little more than pinpricks of light from a half moon. It's a dark carpet of stars, with no paths leading to the house. He prefers it this way - he will not wander there, even in the random caprices of sleep. There is nothing to see that he hasn't traveled the memory of in his mind a thousand times already. Nothing treasured - mildew, scuffed centuries-old wood, the cool humidity of stone halls. Crisp pine sap and the smell of frost on the guelder rose bushes.

(*A kitchen, which you yourself have contemplated setting aflame. Does Chiyoh eat from the same crockery where your sister's teeth float? Little bone phantoms, scattered between mouthfuls of pheasant and greens? Do they hurt her mouth like they did yours? Does her stomach cramp with vibernum berries as yours did with hunger?*)

(*Liaukis. Enough.*)

He turns away from the house, striking towards the smell of water - the expanse of a great lake on the property's southern border will be there. The sooner Hannibal sets off to the

brambles and high grasses of the shoreline, the sooner he can again shutter the lens of his mind from this place.

He wanders both quick and slow, drifting. A part of him wants to run from the dread behind him. No matter how many years pass, it is an evil place. Watching the waters of half-forgotten Lake Tauragnas expand forward in the half-light is a mirror of relief, even as the cat willows and reeds itch at his palms that graze their tops. Not a ripple is to be seen on the glassy surface.

“It’s not better in the water,” says a voice, something that Hannibal recognizes as being Will but not Will. To his right, standing waist deep and wading in the high reeds, is the shadow of the younger man.

Will is lunar bright, a strange amalgamation of the youth in his police portrait with a crescent for a smile and a badge, and the sweating feverish man he remembers sitting in his office, seizing his way through nights. His dress blues disappear into the water even as his arms tremble on its surface. It’s very striking - a cropped haired rusalka at the edge of his homeland.

“It’s not the castle,” says Hannibal. “That is sufficient for me.”

“It’s your home,” says not-Will. He stutters around his white lips and red tongue, eyes fluttering. “Doesn’t that mean something?”

Hannibal frowns, disturbed by the tremors, even as they don’t disturb the lake - another seizure. “Not for many years, and hopefully many more.”

The younger man blinks, slow, swallowing thickly. His eyes are blackened by his blown fixed pupils - Hannibal thinks of the clozapine, the myriad effects it would have. “But she’s still there,” he says. It's something Will can't possibly know. (*It's something you reluctantly deign to acknowledge on the worst of days.*)

“It’s not enough to want to stay," he says, licking his teeth, favoring the tip on a sharp point of his own. Thinking of Mischa always tastes of hunger and clean picked bones. "I took part

of her with me anyway."

"Then you understand," says not-Will.

Hannibal frowns, but this young quivering thing before him leans forward, and grabs Hannibal by his forearms to draw him into the cool waters. It takes his feet, his knees, his legs, eddying navy-dark in the nighttime around him and cold. Hannibal doesn't think to struggle, even as logic and the heart beat in his throat says this is a time for flight, and that strange inert feeling of running in dreams takes over. (*Logically, you know this is sleep paralysis - necessary to keep the body from hurting itself.)*

(You hate it, all this forced inaction.)

Right now he can understand, and the surety of that conviction keeps him soft in not-Will's hard nails. Onward they sink, waist to shoulder, neck to crown of the head. Tauragnas is the deepest waters in the whole of Lithuania, and it is right to vanish into them. He wants to put his fingers through the brackish curled hair, and grasp the fine tendrils at the base of the younger man's neck. The reeds cage them in.

It is the closest they have ever been, and it is wondrous, and it is not real.

Hannibal never wakes with a start, but he does wake turning to stand, purposeful.

Alana doesn't stir, even as he looms at the edge of the bed for many hours, pushing the feeling of lake-damp hands from his arms. Only when the dawn begins to peek through the edge of the curtains does he allow himself to head downstairs.

A strict regimen is meant to be maintained.

Please enter your password.

Hannibal has never read a more disappointing phrase.

Will's laptop sits open and lit before him, a cup of coffee to his right and a plate of almandine cake on a petite plate next to it. It has been a long night, and an early morning, early enough to sliver almonds and marzipan into buttered tins and bake until the smell of forest and lake-water is no longer raucous. He forces himself to finish the task, even with the promise of the laptop, but that is proving to be a difficult subject as well. Hannibal is tired, which he doesn't often feel.

The lock screen is obnoxiously dark - a background image of the Sierra Nevada mountains at night, where along the lower half of the display is a line of peaks that appear as teeth. It's the kind of landscape Will would enjoy.

He flexes his fingers. Well, best start simply.

He types: *password.*

The screen reloads. ***Password incorrect*** , it says in red letters.

He types Will's birthday, in numerals and spelled out fully. Also incorrect. He tries each dog's name, the date his employment starts at the FBI academy, at the Behavioral Sciences Unit, even his own name and Alana's. ***Password incorrect*** . Hannibal pauses, starting to feel the beginnings of disappointment. What are his alternatives? Does he request a copy of the hard drive from a less scrupulous computer technician? That's hardly going to reveal habits - if there's anything interesting in the folders of Will's laptop, it has long since been catalogued, and Jack Crawford has tried his best to examine it.

There has been an exceptional amount discussed between Hannibal and Will, but Will is nothing if not educated, highly literate, and a little bit paranoid. The probability of him figuring out Will's password is next to impossible without technical intervention. For all that they are remarkably attuned, this is one arena that it could truly be anything, and Hannibal would be none the wiser until it was explained to him.

Hannibal has to admit that he doesn't know if he gets in that this is even a route of actual information. Perhaps he has simply gathered another of Will Graham's forgotten possessions, of no actual value other than it having once belonged to Will. Perhaps it is time for him to accept that this is a waiting game, and he will have to wait for Will to blink to truly have an avenue of communication. Perhaps it's time to move onto another task - it's been weeks. What's a few more in the grand scheme of things?

(*"You are obsessed with Will Graham," says Bedelia. You don't really correct her. Having passion projects is important. Only boring people don't experience obsession.*)

Hannibal sighs, drinks a sip of coffee, and moves to put the laptop away. When reaching for his office bag, there's a flash of yellow from the underside of the laptop. It's something stuck to it - clumsily taped in place and loosened in transit.

Hannibal feels his fingers squeeze too hard for the flash of a second - strength to choke - before he turns the laptop over - and blesses whosoever is in charge of basic cybersecurity in the halls of the FBI evidence room, and their absolute lack of efficacy.

(*"You always bring me such pleasant things. You're a good luck charm," says Murasaki from her vanity, ageless and undying in the halls of your mind. You think of this moment often. You're fourteen years old, new to the house, and utterly stunned to silence by her before learning to grow into praise, and god, do you grow into it.*)

Along the bottom of the laptop is taped a bright yellow post it note, in someone's scribbled hand:

Evidence Intake Date: 11-18-XXXX

Case Number: BSU-16-2139

Item Number: 10

User Name: GrahamW1136

Password: 2425KerlerecStreet

2425 Kerlerec Street. It lights Hannibal's mind up like a spotlight. The address of the little blue shotgun house with the bruise-bright flowers. He's sure of it.

He enters the password, and sharply hits enter.

The laptop screen fades, replaced by a desktop image of Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp", in dark, soft brushstrokes. It's cropped in to center on the face of the central scholar depicted, staring directly into the audience. He is haunted, seeing outside the room even now. Hannibal feels momentarily arrested by the dark-eyed gaze. It's entirely appropriate, and entirely Will.

There's nothing of particular interest on the desktop itself - Will leaves tidy folders, sorted by date for lectures, a small digital notepad with each.

The next success is easier still - Microsoft Outlook, government installed and mandated, pops up in the lower right corner - ***You have 614 new messages.*** He clicks the icon, and the program opens easily.

Well, somewhat easily. It takes almost a full 5 minutes for the entirety of the Inbox to populate, with rows and rows and rows of missives in varying states, many flagged important. All of them are unopened, no matter how far down he drags the cursor, including his own emails.

(*You are unexpectedly relieved - maybe Will doesn't even know about them.*)

He checks the Sent folder. This is where actual signs of life will happen, and Hannibal is expecting a few missives here and there - Doctor Schroeder's office and the slow communication of the real estate agent that handled the sale of the Wolf Trap house speak to

rare, occasional email replies, and certainly a different phone number. But Hannibal is curious to see what the response to Doctor Schroeder was - what rebuke he had given her to make her stare Hannibal down so. Who else is he talking to? What *are* the concerns of Will Graham these days, when no one of his known life is interesting enough to return to?

What he finds he almost doesn't comprehend initially. Will is getting good at evoking that feeling in him lately.

FW: Looking for Missing Projector in Hall F

FW: Your Daily Highlights from the New York Times

FW: Regarding the Dermestidae Lecture and Nature Publication

FW: Final Evaluation Dates for Spring Semester

FW: A little birdie told me...

And on it goes - 614 entries strong.

It's all forwards, not a single reply for pages and pages. He can see emails dating back to a couple of weeks after Will leaves the hospital, maybe a day or two after the house appears for sale for the first time. Everything prior to that is dated before his incarceration.

He opens the most recent forwarded message in the list.

From: wsgraham@faculty.fbinaa.org

To: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

Subject: FW: Looking for Missing Projector in Hall F

Hi Team,

It's come to the janitorial staff's attention that one of the light projector's from Hall F is missing, so much so that it's entirely not in the raised housing that it is intended to permanently be installed in…

Hannibal cannot be bothered with what the rest of the message from *j.hodgens* of Quantico faculty fame has to say. They will have to resolve their projector issue on someone else's time, because standing out like a bell tower in the town square is the email's forwarding address.

52hertzgraham@gmail.com

(*"There's a whale," says Will. "Can't talk to other whales, no matter how much he seeks them out. He repels them actually."*)

And just like that, Hannibal has his first real lead. Not from his months of manipulation, not from his smooth manner of speaking, and not from emotional attachment between himself and Will. (*That part hurts, but you are not yet willing to admit that part hurts* .) Just overlooked bad bookkeeping, as Will found Garrett Jacob Hobbes. It is fitting. It is right.

As a week passes, with nothing in particular coming to mind to write about and the words not falling into place easily, it is also hugely irritating. It feels laden with importance that it be right - but what's right for Will these days? What interests him when the ecstacy and horror of his sight is relieved of violence?

(*Very little. Take some small comfort in that you are in good company.*)

The switch from surgery to psychiatry has largely been a successful one for Hannibal. He doesn't miss the days long shifts, despite his excellent awareness and need for little sleep. He

enjoys the longer-term glimpses into people as individuals, sifting through the chaff for the grain of their being. He's found other ways to pursue his skills with a scalpel, and has never suffered the concern of his ability rusting with disuse.

By contrast, the drawbacks have mostly been in regards to the client base itself. Will Graham is not a typical patient, for all that he wasn't formally one either. He is hardly even a rare exception. Will's neurological profile and point of view is entirely unique despite Hannibal's years of practicing, and that makes going back to the regular appointments all the more tiresome. For every hour in a week spent with Will, there is thirty more spent with truly dull people. In the absence of Will, wandering the western reaches of the United States and perhaps beyond, there is merely the thirty hours of dragging time. He is seeking wars with every interaction, an Achilles doomed to no match in combat.

Fortunately, a few exceptions exist even then. Hannibal is relieved for them, an occasional escape from the banality of everyday life. He is hardly driven by an entirely compulsory need to slaughter men, but sometimes he thinks it's at least more entertaining.

Wide-eyed, myopic Iris is a forceful presence to contend with for a Tuesday afternoon, for all that she stands as tall as a blazer buttonhole, where she offers him iceberg roses from her garden. He always takes them, charmed by the image of her gnarled hands passing soft white blooms to him. She has frizzy salt-colored hair to match. Barring the esteemed company of those like Will Graham (*who challenges you*) and the delicate cases like Margot Verger (*who you challenge*), she is a favorite for her effervescent conversation and singularness. She is not mentally ill like some, but not directionless as others often are. Nervous, anxious perhaps. Old, afraid of being forgotten. She likes birds very much.

Today she brings him a single purple anemone from her garden, as dark centered as a piece of coal. She has been very careful to not let the pollen settle in the blue-violet petals and stain them. Hannibal gives equal consideration pulling the cut stem through the buttonhole of his navy suit jacket.

"You have an Evening Grosbeak in the oak outside, did you know?" says Iris, interrupting his thank yous for his impromptu boutonniere, shuffling out of her little wool coat, an olive colored thing that she has pinned a silver lily brooch to. Hannibal helps her, pulling it from her frail arms to put on the rack near the door. "Lovely yellow plumage, a handsome lad to keep the company of a handsome man. A little late in the season for him though."

“You will turn my head saying such things, Iris,” he says with a rare honest smile. “It is already a great effort to dress to match the company inside, much less the company out.”

“You do well enough,” she grouses. “I feel like it’s Sunday Brunch every time I come over and try to get ready like it will be.”

“Then perhaps we can discuss that today, but first, for updates - it’s been some weeks since I saw you last. How was New Zealand?”

She lights up, rheumy blue eyes aglow with pleasure. “Sam and I had a wonderful time. Baltimore is so miserable in the winter, with all the snow and mud and leaves all over the place. It’s nice to just skip the entire season for the southern hemisphere’s summer. Just gales and gales of wonderful warm air, sailing the islands, and parrots in the mountains. Did you know they have parrots in the mountains? Frightfully smart boys and girls. Bit Sam once for a corner of his sandwich, but they are beautiful.”

“Hungry animals are not to be ignored,” he says with a laugh, gesturing for her to sit. “So you followed your avian friends south for the winter for alpine parrots. What else did you see?”

“Oh, all sorts,” she sighs. “Fantails, robins, eagles, lots of feathered friends. I missed the hummingbirds at home terribly, felt guilty they had no feeders in our yard this time, but this was probably my last big trip before old age gets the better of me.” She settles her purse on a side table, smoothing her long wool skirt. Hannibal is charmed by the dated black buckled loafers she wears with her hose, always perfectly squared and proper posture. “A new one for my birding book this time though - wandering albatrosses. Terrible bullies they are, harassing the penguins and looking sad on the bluffs like they've been wronged. So big and impressive though!”

Hannibal leans forward. “As active as you are, Iris, I can’t imagine old age doing more than giving you a few extra wrinkles to squint around your binoculars. I pray I am half as nimble and mobile outdoors as you in twenty years time. Tell me more about your bird - I’ve only heard of them in literature. Surely that’s who you went for.”

“Macquarie Island, for penguins mostly!” she responds. “Never thought I would be much of an Antarctic explorer, but I wanted to see some wild penguins before I keel over, and there’s

three species there. Sam was fine with the boat, maybe a little less excited about going on the shore with the university kids, but he's an old grouch."

He shuffles in the chair, watching her grow more animated the more that she describes. It is refreshing after weeks of gradual disappointment.

Honestly, he has often thought she is merely lonely, and content to pay a substantial co-pay for the benefit of intelligent company while her husband ignores her. Why she settles with Hannibal has always been unclear, despite his amused appreciation of the elderly woman. (*"What's cooking, good looking," she says, and you, amused, think of your ill-gotten lunches and laugh her off, happy for once to have someone not know.*) She is a character passing through his sphere, and while Hannibal does not attach to people easily, she is pleasantly memorable, the highest compliment he pays out to the masses.

She speaks of the island for the duration of the session, waxing nostalgic on white winged birds with serious faces, and their ability to fly for months at sea. Her wandering albatrosses, with the three metre wingspan, and the long storytelling history. Travelers, life partners, and good omens. Rarely landing, following boats for food and occasional shelter. She feels more strongly about the winged fauna of New Zealand and Oceania than he can rightly say he has felt about most people.

Iris raises a hand to her cheek, eyes rolling to the window. "There's only a few pairs on the island. Just the saddest thing, watching one come home to realize it was alone this year. All the others preening and pointing to each other, just a big party after months alone on the water, and one big white and speckled kid still waiting and calling." He's intrigued to see how sharply this instance marks her, gazing vacant into the space behind him.

"Take heart, my dear," he says, helping her to her feet when the hour grows late. "Nature is a powerful and cruel mistress. Surely your birds don't feel the loss the same way as humans."

"You'd think," she says with an unladylike shrug. The lily pin winks in the late afternoon sun. "I certainly hope not. I don't wish that kind of loss on anyone. Imagine not ever knowing what happened."

(*You do. Constantly.*)

When Hannibal looks the albatrosses up later on his tablet, he can agree they have very strange gazes - black button eyes in a downy white sloped face. He cannot think he's ever had the privilege of seeing one. Despite a brief flirtation with sailing in his teenaged years and early 20s, it has always been the more casual sort, something one does on weekends to take in the air and the coastline.

This kind of creature is the desolate sort, flying to foreign landscapes. He thinks of the green cliff-filled islands, and snow capped mountains of the Antarctic, of great pale wings catching currents, floating to the next safe harbor. Something he's never personally experienced, but likes to think he has the measure of it in some way.

It's a relief when Hannibal realizes he knows what he wishes to share with Will for the first time in weeks.

He sends his email shortly after he closes his sessions for the night - an encrypted email address with no real attachment to him makes a comfortable mask to speak more frankly than they are normally inclined to do. Him, the guide to the Inferno, to Will, waiting in expectation for someone to listen to him in the vastness of the sea.

From: "Virgil Maro" onacheronsshore@protonmail.com

To: 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

Subject: On the Subject of Wandering Albatrosses

Dear Will,

Let's have a bit of honesty between us, albeit through dishonest means. Should that frustrate you, I must say that you are the one who set the ground rules...

He gets a reply.

When he sees it at first, shining brightly in his private inbox - “Re: On the Subject of Wandering Albatrosses” - Hannibal very nearly cancels his second appointment for the day that Thursday, and contemplates the third skeptically. It would be rude, but so too would be listening with half an ear when he is far too distracted. (*You couldn’t manage it for La Gioconda - what makes you think you’ll manage for Samuel Bergstrom, an aging investor who is beginning to realize he is long past his heyday, and looks to you to provide satisfaction with his decidedly mediocre retirement? You can barely manage a polite smile on most days - what a terribly bland cage Mr. Bergstrom has crafted for himself.*)

After weeks and weeks of silence, and only the suggestion of conversation from others, he will have his first contact with Will. He keeps the appointments, but wastes no time checking the email.

When he opens it, it is shockingly brief.

From: -,- 52hertzgraham@gmail.com

To: “Virgil Maro”, onacheronsshore@protonmail.com

Subject: Re: On the Subject of Wandering Albatrosses

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks had I from old and young!

Instead of the cross, the Albatross about my neck was hung.

For the first time in many years, Hannibal is at something of a loss to write something in response.

The line is familiar - he had teased at the Rime of the Mariner, and has received a reply in kind. Thirsty and hot, the crew turns on the narrator, setting blame for their discomfort and the ill winds of their voyage. As penance, the mariner is made to wear his kill around his neck, a sign of his crimes and bad luck. The lightest of birds becomes the heaviest of weights, driving him mad as the story progresses.

It's a rebuke.

(*It's a fair one.*)

Hannibal rolls his chair away from the desk, drumming his fingers on the hardwood tabletop.

So what is Hannibal to say?

"Apologies, I thought you'd find that trip to prison more diverting than you did." "It's unfortunate Will, but I couldn't just kill you outright, even if that would have been the practical solution." "Don't worry about the encephalitis, I would have told you if I had suspected you were close to doing more than experiencing fugue states and the occasional seizure. Perfectly healthy in a middle aged white male, don't look any further into that." "Sorry you felt the need to sell your house, sorry you got rid of the emotional security blanket that was your dogs." "I didn't set out to take your job and your romantic interest away, it just worked out where I could, and have you for myself, and you did the only thing that could stop me." "My mistake, I never thought I would miss you like a limb, I don't know who I ever talked to before you."

(*That last one rings true.*)

But the thoughts keep pouring out, even as he closes the laptop back up, running shy of time between appointments. The more they fall to the floor, the emptier the hollow in his chest becomes.

"Please don't hide, there's no one like you." "Please come back home, I want to talk to you." "Please understand you weren't ready for me, and I am sometimes unsure if I am ready for

you.”

No one thing is sufficient. No one answer will explain it all, even with all the hundreds of reasons he could give. They are all valid reasons, and not one of them has the potency to change this situation, and not be an unkindness worthy of hanging.

(*Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*)

Two nights later, he opens it again to respond.

He closes it.

After a few weeks adrift, no further in composing a response, with unremarkable evenings in, and distraction at work, he resolves to reassess his mood properly. Hannibal has always been a good steward of his own mental health care, but bending someone else’s ear is beneficial for perspective. Alana would likely be flattered and pleased with the opportunity, which is exactly why he doesn’t speak with her.

Besides, he already has a psychiatrist of his own.

“I thought I was very clear about ending our client-patient relationship,” Bedelia says, opening the door to a lovely rented townhouse in the Bethesda area. She is calm, but Hannibal watches the steady tick of a vein in her neck with a placid smile. He quite admires the brick streets, and the Neoclassical grey monstrosity she has taken up residence in, with rustic neutrals and crystal throughout. Shabby chic - something comfortable and mainstream. It doesn’t suit her.

Bedelia is simple to track down, in the aftermath of Will's trial, prolonged incarceration, and eventual release. It actually annoys him how much easier it is for him to find her than it is to find Will. Hannibal actually rather suspects that Bedelia has been prodigiously listening for news of his disappearance. She is so keen to see the worst in Hannibal, and after all that he has done for her. How wounded he should feel.

It seems that she has been speaking to Jack Crawford as well. Isn't that curious.

He smiles.

(*A problem for another day. You know he has nothing, and if she is the clever lady you know her to be, she will offer nothing concrete, just allusions. She has a talent for obfustication that you whole-heartedly like to mull over, but today's problem requires her whole* .)

"I've rather been of the mind recently that we never really stop having client-patient relationships," he says, glib and unbothered. "Fortunately I was in the area - did you know I've bought a house in Virginia? Your current abode is very lovely, by the way...a very pleasant grey shade on the house facade. May I?" he gestures inwards.

And yes, he may.

Bedelia has always been clearly torn between annoyance and fascination when it comes to Hannibal. She has also gone between attraction and aversion to him in long cycles from the beginning of their acquaintance to this day - the slight irritated blush on her cheeks as she swirls her generous glass of Pinot Gris is quite fetching. He considers telling her as much to see if she takes to it, or ignores it for the test it almost always is.

He is in the business of taking liberties, and it's an interesting examination of her tolerance to see exactly *what* is too much.

“What brings you to this neck of the woods, Hannibal? I hardly think you were making a friendly neighborhood visit to the National Institutes of Health, unless you’re considering a switch to academia,” says Bedelia, gesturing to a pair of velvet and chenille white arm chairs that dominate a small sitting room adjacent to the kitchen and dining room. The window overlooks a green lawn and sparkling pool - it’s all very upper middle class caucasian family. Hannibal wants to leave it all behind on principal.

He takes a seat, crossing his legs comfortably and examining his glass of wine. “We are all academics of life,” he says with a smile. “But no, I was rather looking for your instruction this time. My thoughts have been less clear that I prefer.”

“Will Graham again, I presume,” she says.

It really is remarkable how good she is at pretending at aloofness when there is frustration. It’s not immediately obvious - a studious blankness that she lets fall like the theatre’s curtain. Hannibal is reminded again why he has modeled his own psychiatry practice so carefully after her own.

Hannibal nods. “It has recently come to my attention that he is aggrieved by the recent tides of the FBI. I would offer comfort, but it would seem I am the origin to much of the aggrievance. An ill omen of sorts for him, not a source of consolation.”

“Imagine that,” she says lightly.

Hannibal smiles, amused. “I would of course explain my position to him in person, but I think you’ve inspired him Bedelia. I hardly expect to find him living temporarily in such...fine surroundings, but the concept of skipping town for other pursuits has taken root,” he says, standing to pace towards the windows. The sunlight and lawn are pleasant in the spring daytime. “I have an open means to reach out, but I find myself hesitating to do so.”

(*You are a little surprised to feel that’s true.*)

She takes a sip of her wine, examining the stem and bowl of the glass. She’s contemplating if she should say what she wants to say. “I don’t know Will Graham as you do,” she starts, a

little haltingly herself. “We’ve had a very brief acquaintance, under unpleasant circumstances for him. But,” she adds, “I suspect you do not know Will Graham as well as you think, either.”

Hannibal smiles wider, turning his head more fully towards her. “Better than most, I should think.”

“Medically or literally, certainly. Emotionally, only through the lens of your own desire.”

“Should we not look at people with the lens of our desires? I should think we’d hardly ever speak to each other at all if that were the case.”

Her lips thin. “Do you think yourself incapable of projection?” Another sip of wine, a little too long in the taking.

Hannibal rises and paces towards the windows. “Projecting is how we shape our reality. I would hardly have risen from my childhood experiences were it not for projection. Not many opportunities for communist country refugees in high circles, even as the beneficiary of a wealthy extended family,” he says, and pictures even now Robertas looking shame-faced and sad as he takes his nearing puberty nephew from the immigration office in Paris, apologizing for what was then his very rudimentary French. He is not ashamed of Hannibal, but he is ashamed all the same. “Projection onto loved ones and friends is as common for me as any other person. Will is just well-equipped to understand it.”

(*There is no other capable as he - you will have no other. It wounds hour by hour that he will not have you as you are now.*)

“You act on the assumption that his disorder allows him to not only see things exactly as you do, but that he understands, appreciates, and enjoys it from an intellectual and emotional perspective,” Bedelia drawls, frowning. “I would argue that the first two perspectives, understanding and appreciation through acknowledgment, define his empathy. The third, enjoyment, is subject to personal taste.”

“Is not the appreciation the enjoyment as well?”

“I appreciate the skill it takes to craft much of today’s contemporary art. Does that mean I can’t dislike it or wish to change something about it? Is there no accounting for aesthetics and purpose?”

Fair point. “Aesthetics are subjective, but purpose,” says Hannibal, drawing it out, thinking of Will, seizing in his dining room while Abel Gideon watches. The roll of his uncut sapphire-dull eyes, the blackness of the pupils. Will Graham is hurting in this moment. Will Graham is beautiful in it as well. It will all be worth it - he will make it so. “That is constant.”

Bedelia twitches her mouth at the corners, for her what is meant to be a smile of amusement, rigid and stone-like.

“Is it?” she asks.

Hannibal considers the shine of the wood floor and fingerprints on the stem of his glass. The Pinot Gris is tart, sharp, and entirely dry. It is all displeasing.

He looks back to Bedelia. In her own blush pink and white outfit, she looks angular and misplaced in this overly stuffed house, living a perpetual trophy wife’s spa day. For a moment he hates her, all of her artifice and cold perception, constantly driven to find soft tissue. He learned from the best, and she is still skilled enough to draw blood.

Today she is too much for *him* , and she knows it, at last the victor as she escorts him out after checking her watch, a woman of ritual.

(*You **did** ask for perspective.*)

Going to the Wolf Trap house has started turning into an act in meditation. The long drive out to the property has grown more pleasant as the weather turns from the grim muddy winter to spring. He's surprised to see that there are apple trees along the back of the property, delicate pink and fair even as they begin to leaf out. They can be seen from the window at the upstairs hallway. Hannibal likes to think Will would have stood there, quiet. It's one of his most attractive features - his ability to enjoy stillness.

A point of consideration, that he has mulled since leaving Bedelia's company: he doesn't actually know Will.

(*It's on repeat - you don't actually know Will.*)

That is perhaps ungenerous. Hannibal knows Will, but he truly knows only two versions of him, both honest incarnations but inextricably entwined to Hannibal. There are surely shades of Will he hasn't seen, much as Will did not see Hannibal's shades until Hannibal pulled the clay from his eyes and named him healed, laying the groundwork for his freedom.

There is Will, the man that puts his work for the FBI above himself, a vision of a martyr coming to rest in dark alleys and lonely hotel rooms. The house in Wolf Trap becomes the wilderness to commune with his inner self, the trials of the world surrounding it always waiting just a phone call away. This one suffers divinely, wondering at horrors while the bureaucratic foot soldiers of the FBI and onlooking law enforcement sneer. His mind is horror and beauty. Hannibal watches, stricken by it.

This one fascinates Hannibal - he wants to vivisect him, and see the network of his veins, hold him still and crush his lungs between his fingers to feel life rush in and out of him. (*You would hold him so still, so carefully* .)

There is also Will, the gentle but intelligent companion, always afraid of the strength of his hands when the strength of his mind was so much more biblically awe-filling. Abigail could not properly appreciate this one that seeks the skin of a father, and Alana is afraid of this shade of a friend, of his earnest fear of doing harm. Will the Gentle offers gruff advice, turns wine bottles for gifting nervously in his hands, and drives in excess of two hours to sit with Hannibal and converse like old friends, sharing his mind, the only resource he perceives he has, his two remaining silver shekels given to the temple of Judea, because Hannibal is kind to him and Will has not known many kindnesses.

This one Hannibal misses, like an absent tooth, glided over with each bite. This one laughs at jokes about epithelial tissues, lights up at the mention of Thoreau, drives Hannibal to consider his greatest *amor fati* , his love of fate. (*You are in the best of all worlds for that shard of time in the drawing room at night, sharing snifters and thoughts. You cannot remember feeling more challenged, and guilelessly content* .)

Hannibal does not understand this new Will that is released of obligation, able to drop the costume of Will the Martyr and Will the Gentle Friend to lay on the floor forgotten. He can freely admit he didn't predict it - Will has always been stalwart in his dependability, and Hannibal has depended on him wanting answers. His lack of desire for them and substantial skills with living without a need for socialization is beyond the pale.

With the ease that he takes to it, this Will is surely modeled after his father, the perpetual drifter that takes Will to the shores of Erie and the Gulf of Mexico. A well-meaning parent, saddled with the burden of an emotionally dependent son who cannot stop his reaching gaze any more than stop the slow decay of time.

Hannibal cannot know this shade through Will at this time - the email address is a venue of communication, but it does not account for narrative, or for the temperment of an unfettered son. There are no coves and hollows for nuance in the geography of electronic devices, all the meanings missed in texts and unread missives. He can send dozens and dozens of emails, and the content will still not speak the same lingua franca.

But he can know this Will through its original incarnation - Will Graham’s father.

“Do you often book last minute flights to New Orleans?” asks Alana, watching him as he shuffles through the bedroom. She hasn’t changed out of her work attire yet - he suspects she had meant to stay the night.

“I often follow flights of fancy, if that’s what you’re asking,” he replies easily. “I find a good vacation helps recalibrate during a rough week.”

Alana frowns, looking not so much cross as she does pinched. Thoughtful. “Will wasn’t much of a fan,” she says. “Talked about how it was a sieve of desperate people and wealthy opportunists after the hurricane. I’ve only ever been for a conference, and it was very distinct and vibrant, but sad at times. He had the right idea, I think.”

“Will has a way with words,” says Hannibal, listening with only half an ear, brushing by with his duffel bag.

“So which are you?” she asks, folding her leg over the other from the bench at the foot of the bed. Her arms are crossed, hair thrown over her shoulders.

Hannibal stops. “Come again?”

“Are you a desperate person, or a wealthy opportunist?”

Hannibal looks at her, lips twitching to a vague smile. He often forgets how deep he has taught her to cut.

(*Be fair - you had never expected her to cut* ***you*** .)

The sound of clothing being laid out to pack is the only sound for some time after. Alana leaves after dinner.

She was always an excellent pupil, but not the right disposition, lacked the right amount of conviction with the hand that wields the blade. A soft woman, no matter how sharp the mind. It’s gratifying to be surprised, and frustrating as well. (*That’s two women that have gotten the better of you this week.*)

It takes little time to book passage to New Orleans. With the heat and humidity of May creeping into the waters of the Gulf, the tourism industry is close to winding down for the summer, where the unmistakable smell of a sinking city gives the entire metro a greasy sheen. Everything is incandescent and washed out in the daytime sun, waiting for the softness of night to light the street signs and remaining Plantation and brightly painted Franco-style homes. By all rights, Hannibal would normally love it. It's historied in a way that the majority of the New World is lacking.

Hannibal hates it, wiping sweat from his neck with a handkerchief.

His travels today bring him to 2425 Kerlerec Street, before the peeling blue paint and the day lilies alongside the old house. It is a sad ruin on a bad street, and every bit the washed out thing that sat in a cheap frame, printed on cheap film in the office of Will Graham. Singular, a thorn in an already rough neighborhood. The late spring brightens the walls with the heavy red flowers he has seen in the photos, though it is too late for the purple irises. The fact that the width of the house is no longer than his rental car but as deep if not deeper than his own townhouse in Baltimore is unlike anything he's seen during his time in the Americas.

The county permits had been easy for his attorney to call for, as well as the title information. Built in the 1890s, it had been made for the Fuselier family, a young couple branching off from their Colonialist family who lived in what is now the Evangeline Parish. The area is not wealthy - Treme Lafitte was Will's task force assignment, and is apparently quite infamous for the violent crime there. It has never been held in Will's name, but does find its way to him by earnest means - simple potential inheritance.

The freefall of public census records bring Hannibal to what he seeks eventually, albeit he did have to clarify at least once with a family member of the Evangeline Parish's Fuselier clan before leaving Baltimore. The home passes from Saul and Beriline Fuselier, to son Samuel Fuselier, to second son Everett Fuselier and his wife Neta, a service man in World War II and later in the Vietnam War. They are not wealthy. Everett and Neta have one child, late in life - Evelyn Graham née Fuselier.

(*"Some lazy psychiatry, Doctor Lecter. Low hanging fruit.")*

There are no tenants in the old Fuselier house - each window and door is meticulously shuttered with ornate wrought iron. It is in disrepair, but clean. Perhaps a neighbor or a hired service. Hannibal will not find the mysterious elder Graham here.

So it goes, but that's what tax records are for.

He calls the Metcalfe firm as he walks back to his car rental, and returns to his hotel for the night. The lights of the French Quarter are brightening even now, and a Sazerac takes the edge off the heat. He will do his best to enjoy this place - this is in many ways Will's only home town, no matter the nomadic life he has grown into. With no cutting northern highland wind or soviet relics littered about the countryside, he certainly likes it better than his own.

Evelyn Fuselier, graduate of the class of 1983, looks out from Hannibal's computer screen that night in his quiet high-floored room in the Ritz Carlton. She has a doll-round face, a narrow curving smile, and layers and layers of glossy brown curling hair like a modern-era Lillian Gish. She would look beautiful in black and white, but here in vibrant high school Senior technicolor is somewhat manic. The wide blue eyes and sharp cupid's bow of her mouth are unmistakably Will's. He can see something of the photographed young police academy graduate here, whereas ten years later, he is distinctly more his father's son. Evelyn looks impish, barely even a woman yet.

Byron has been most efficient in his legal research where Hannibal has looked almost entirely at pedigree. Miss bright-eyed Evelyn has a rather brief and sordid life.

(*"I suspect that fruit is on a very high branch. Difficult to reach."*)

("So is my mother. Never knew her.")

She is just 18 when she has her first child, still yet out of wedlock, born William Sawyer Graham. She has her first schizophrenic episode not long after in what could have once been considered a Magdalene laundry, a women's Catholic seminary school that she is enrolled in, where this shiny colorful devil from their yearbook stares out at him. Presumably punishment for her illegitimate pregnancy - Americans and religious people are so prudish. She is 19 when she is married for the first time shortly after, and she is dead at 21 when a manic episode hits midday on a Tuesday afternoon. She was at home with her parents - temporarily estranged from her husband, says the police report.

(***A line from a recent journal - "Twin studies have documented significant heritability across the spectrum of psychopathology, with estimates ranging from 20% to 45% for anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and major depressive disorder; from 50% to 60% for alcohol dependence and anorexia nervosa; and from 75% upwards for autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder."***)

The elder Fuseliers don't seek guardianship for their very young grandson in the ensuing custody hearing. But they do put their son-in-law as the trustee for the Kerlerec property.

Beau William Graham, reads the tax records. A quick search of the listed tax address for the shotgun house puts him in Savannah, Georgia, in a rental property that no matter how small is likely beyond his means. Hannibal suspects Will helps pay for it. There's nothing to suggest he is anything but the most dutiful of sons.

Savannah is in some ways substantially less comfortable than New Orleans, though Hannibal sends a brief prayer of thanks out into the universe for the lack of urban smell - the combination of human waste, urine, and the sea has always had a particular stomach turning quality that he struggles with. It is arguably the thing he most dislikes about Paris, a city he otherwise remembers fondly. The air is thicker here, but with the freshness of the river and marshlands, it's more natural.

Hannibal's suits are suffering in the heat, which is to say Hannibal has not been able to keep a suit jacket on since landing at the airport and settling his luggage. The accommodations follow the charming trend of upscaling historic warehouses, but more importantly the upscaling of air conditioning. He doesn't think he's ever seen a larger window unit in all his life, or been more grateful for its size. He is almost remorseful to leave it behind.

Casing the house itself is a simple matter. At noon on a Tuesday, he fully expects Beau to be away for the day. This proves true when he pulls up to the little bungalow house, a stark white with curled trellis and brick framing the front and a long walkway on the north side of the home.

The neighborhood is modest, south of the downtown area, and despite the somewhat yellowed grass, the property is in good repair, hedges at the front full of black and yellow orb weaver spiders like sentries. A good Southern pair of gargoyles on either side of the front porch, gathering moths and mosquito hawks. The front door is gated with a screen - the door beyond is locked. A white egret watches him from the branches of a tree nearby, where the Spanish moss pours over in spilling falls.

Well, one has to start somewhere.

Windows, side doors, and small side garage prove to be locked as well. Beau is a vigilant keeper of his house. From beyond the windows of the front porch, Hannibal can make out the black and white ticked coat of an old dog - a hound of some kind, watching him with a raised head. He had wondered if this would be the originator of Will's dog habits.

He raises his hands on either side of his head, smiling, and backs away.

From across the street, in the comfort of a well ventilated car, Hannibal watches for the remainder of the day. Beau arrives in a beat up Lincoln Continental around 4:30 pm, wiping his hands of motor oil on his jeans even as he exits the car to come home.

Hannibal is chiefly surprised by Beau's stature, taller than himself, and wiry. Will, while certainly not much smaller than Hannibal himself, is quite willowy, whereas Beau from this vantage looks sturdy as an old post. He supposes Will has led a largely academic life for some years, while Beau has continued his toils as a blue collar worker. His hands are gentle with the big hound that he let's out of the front door, sweetly rubbing the long ears between his fingers, but they are gnarled.

Byron has done more for Hannibal in regards to Beau the way he has done for the long absent Fuselier estate, digging up a wealth of civil disturbances, lawsuits, and tickets served to the older man. Beau Graham is in a habit of disorderly conduct, both sober and drunk. Beau Graham likes to fight before being taken to the station. Beau Graham has never held down a rental contract for more than a couple of years. A recurring theme, no matter the violation, is the surety of Beau never spending more than the mandatory amount of time in the county jail.

Bail money provided - Will Graham, son . Over and over again, ***bail money provided - Will Graham, son*** . ***Bail money provided - Will Graham, son*** .

A long suffering man, that Will Graham, for things he loves. Hannibal cannot imagine a thing he wants more than that constancy. It chokes him with envy.

He watches Beau's work routine for two days before he finally interrupts it. There's nothing more to learn from it - Beau is every bit integrated into a routine as he can be. Now comes the time to apply heat, and pressure, and gain the measure of the stuff that makes him. Hannibal can hardly wait to see where the similarities end between Beau and his emotionally battered son.

It's hardly more than a square room with some chairs and tables, this bar that Beau wanders to at the end of his daily shift. There's a large old formica top bar, humble well drinks, and Christmas lights around its edges. To the side in a separate space, a pool table sits unused.

"Anywhere you like, hun," says the barkeeper, a young black woman with long dreads. Hannibal admires the glint of small silver rings between them, even as his eyes seek out the elder Graham. "What can I getcha?"

What indeed, he thinks, looking at the counter behind her. "The bottle on the right hand side, second shelf. The Disaronno, on ice." Hannibal can enjoy a chilled amaretto, even in a dive bar. She smiles, shaking it a little before pouring. He takes his seat at the countertop, and does not disguise his interest in Beau Graham, sitting on the far end with his beer in hand.

Beau is preserved in a way that is hard to describe. Always a hardened man judging by his lifestyle, Hannibal can't see much of the past 20 years in him other than grayer hair and maybe more wrinkles. He has a very serious look to him, holding his brown beer bottle with a casual two-fingered hold on the neck. The squint of his gaze is unerringly attached to the television in the corner of the bar, where a sitcom runs almost missed by all other eyes in the bar.

So no interest in other people - a first mark in his favor for ways he is like his son.

“She ain’t poured out of ‘dat one in a while,” says Beau Graham, so offhanded that Hannibal might have not realized it was directed at him had he not been watching. “Not a lot of ol’ bastards like me here to drinkin’ amaretto, and the weekend kids don’ know shit ‘bout alcohol.” He’s resolutely picking at the cuffs of his work shirt, rolled to the elbow and fraying in one spot.

Hannibal smiles, and takes position, turning towards him. Curtain raised, lights up - let the show begin.

“Not a popular flavor in the South?” asks Hannibal. “Strange how it finds its way into every bar.”

“Every shit cake drink has it in ‘dere - long as you ain’t askin’ for whipping cream wit’ it, it’s fine by me, but I don’t find myself reachin’ for it often. More of a thing ‘fer th’ girls.”

“Ah yes, the age old gender stereotypes. I suppose next you’ll tell me that I need to have a real drink for casual intake.” Hannibal takes a sip, and puts a crumble of ice between his teeth. It clicks between the molars.

Beau laughs, but it’s more of an incredulous hoot than a proper laugh. “You’ drinkin’ it fer’ real, arent’cha? I like my cake and drink it too,” he says. “Jus’ don’t work too well on an ol’ buzzard like me. ‘Bout has all the burn of a warm tea when you drink ‘s’much as me. Gotta watch my *casual intake* ,” he apes.

Hannibal turns his head away, smiling again. He is surprised by this older shade, and his flippant humor. Hardened, yes, but perhaps delightfully irreverent where his son is serious and cautious with his forays.

Beau gives him a hard look. “What’chu doin’ here anyway? I ain’t seen you before, and this ain’t downtown. I ‘spect you want somethin’,” adds Beau, throwing back the last of his beer. “You got th’ look of someone wit’ expec- *tations* .” He says this with a flourish. Hannibal is

fascinated by it - none of the learned wit of his son is behind it, but it rings true of Will's lecturing cadence.

"Should we not have some small measure of them? I hear standards are a personal goal for most," says Hannibal, turning his glass in hand. The crushed ice is melting, diluting the rich brown liquor. "One would hate to put forward the wrong impression. But yes, as it so happens, I was looking for you. Although probably not for the reasons you expect."

Beau frowns. "I ain't owe you no money. I'd 'member a gent like yo'self."

"Indeed no," says Hannibal, with a fall and rise. "This is our first acquaintance, save mention of each other through someone else."

Beau frowns deeper. "You ain't no friend of my friends," he rumbles. "Too much money, too fancy taste for this waterin' hole. You mus' be one of Will's." He turns his empty bottle on the counter, peeling a corner of the label. There's a defensive hunch to his shoulders. "Can't help ya, don' know where he at."

Hannibal rolls a shoulder of his own. "I rather think you do, in some way. Our Will is in the recent habit of not telling people where he's planning to wander."

Beau snorts, but smiles. "Gets it from me. You mus' be pretty out of sorts, askin' his old man. But Will don' talk 'bout me none. S'pect he wouldn' wit' the likes of you. How'd you find my sorry hide out here?"

(*Here's where it gets tricky.*)

"Common property by law," says Hannibal, watching Beau's face.

For a moment, Beau looks like he might not understand, mouth twisted in a grimace of confusion before he finally starts to make sense of it. Hannibal suspects in the hour or so before he comes into the bar, Beau has been well into his cups after work. He revises this

perception quickly when he sees a strange glint in his green eyes, dark as a well. Something possessive. “What of it? Evie’s house ain’t no business of yours, and I ain’t sellin’ it.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” says Hannibal. “Our childhood homes are our origin story, no matter how unpleasant.”

(*Lecter Castle would be a ruin if not, but it’s yours, and you’ll suffer its existence.*)

“Will ain’t spent no time there, so you’s might as well leave it alone. No home of his, for all that he can have it if he wants it.” Beau gets his curious dark look again, voice going poisonously gentle. (*“But she’s still there.”*) Hannibal knows it the same way he knows his own - something reptilian, waiting quietly for a limb. His eyes are very vivid from beneath the shade of his bushy greying brows.

“Perhaps not,” says Hannibal. Best keep it simple. “But it did lead me to you, and he’s spent a very great amount of time there.”

“I s’pose we’ll see what ‘dat means then,” says Beau, ordering another beer with a wave at the barkeeper. “Yvonne, you get me ‘dat Turkey off the shelf. This ain’t no beer night.”

Indeed it’s not. Beau Graham watches him from his stool, sitting up tall, deceptively gentle with the girl behind the bar when Hannibal sees him for what he is - an old alligator, rocking a shot glass of Wild Turkey on the bar counter with his index finger.

Sitting up in his own chair, tasting almonds, and the *mandorla amara* of pit fruit in his glass, Hannibal rolls his neck. The liqueur is stale from sitting open too long, but one learns the geography of new lands quickly. “Tell me, Mr. Graham,” says Hannibal. “When was the last time you spoke with Will? I think we both have a vested interest in him, and I’ve grown rather unfamiliar with his method of thinking these days.”

“Throwin’ your capital at men gone fishin’?” asks Beau, drawling even as he brings the shot glass to his mouth. “Seems like a poor investment. Shoulda taught you to fish instead. Feeds a man for life, or so’s I hear.”

“Throwing my capital at any body of water where he might be found,” says Hannibal. “We are still working on the lesson that follows after.”

(*Honesty again. Honesty again and again and again, until you can dig the truth out of yourself.*)

Hannibal has to admit he is wrong, and that it is not wholly the wide eyed woman in the yearbook where Will gets his grin - Beau smiles, and it’s as boyish as that young man in the picture, crescent for a mouth.

Chapter End Notes

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In which a series of women trouble Hannibal's thoughts, amirite?
Thanks for joining me again this week.

intermezzo - who, falling there to find his fellow forth, unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself

Following a few shots at the bar at Beau's insistence (*"A man who ain't willin' to drink wit' you ain't got your* interests *at heart," says he*), Beau invites him back to his house after Hannibal makes a stilted but late introduction. It's only stilted in that Beau seems entirely uninterested in specificities like that - the older Graham appears to be content to speak in riddles, and avoid mundane conversation. (*"A doctor," says Beau. "That explains a lot 'bout your bearin'."*) This suits Hannibal fine; he's a skilled conversationalist, but rarely interested in banalities like the weather, the local economy, how the folks are doing. Will is much the same, as is his father, despite the numerous differences.

Hannibal pretends to not know where they're going, and after a few drinks it's not a hard assumption for the present company to make. However, Hannibal makes a simple mistake. He walks in the correct direction, while Beau continues down another road. It's only when he stops hearing the rhythmic crunching of Beau's boots on the concrete and pea gravel that he thinks that something is wrong.

"Goin' somewhere?" asks Beau, smiling. The streetlamps make his square face look sepulchral, mouth cutting an amused line in stone.

"Apologies, Mr. Graham," says Hannibal, turning to meet him. "I left my mind to wander."

"Back to my house, I reckon," says Beau, smiling wider. Hannibal straightens up, squaring his shoulders, recalibrating. "And call me Beau. Mr. Graham's a man at the courthouse." He favors Hannibal with a strange look, before he grins that boyish grin again, made rough by greying stubble. "Seen you in the rental car, s'why I talked t'you first tonight. Like to know what I stepped in, who's rattlin' my windows. But we ain't goin' there right now. We goin' to get the necessary ingredients for a good night in."

Hannibal doesn't know what to say.

(*Not always so clever, are you?*)

They walk to a corner store, where Beau buys a handle of whiskey, whistling his way back home. Hannibal contemplates what will happen if he has to kill Will Graham's father in addition to his surrogate daughter, in addition to his well-liked colleague, in addition to his neurologist, in addition to his fellow patient Georgia, in addition…

On the list goes. On the numbers trend upwards, and Hannibal wonders at how he has not counted them until now, what else he hasn't noticed is less of a small transgression and more of an epidemic of losses for Will.

Beau doesn't make it easy, having walked from home to the bar to the corner store and back, and insisting on Hannibal doing the same. Hannibal would happily drive to avoid the humidity, but he suspects an invite in would not be forthcoming afterwards - he's already shown too much of his hand tonight. Better a moment's discomfort, than to end the visit prematurely.

When they arrive, Beau asks him to wait as he goes inside by himself, but let's the big ticked coat hound out - on his collar, a shiny tag: *Evinrude* . Allowing the hound to smell him, Hannibal scratches Evinrude's ears, black and smooth. The dog is in good condition, even as his keeper isn't. He has a guileless face - probably another stray, though it is anyone's guess if it's a habit of Beau's or a habit of Will's to collect them.

They've never discussed the dog collecting before in depth. It was a comfort for Will - it seemed a shame to make him self-conscious of it when it affected so little for Hannibal.

Savannah smells of brine from the tide riding up into the rivers this evening, and Hannibal is uncomfortably sweating in his white dress shirt and khaki slacks in the half-dark of the porch. He has abandoned his cotton blazer to the back of a mildewing white wicker rocking chair - one of a pair on the long veranda following one side of the old bungalow house. There's a row of day lilies beneath the porch here as well, but these ones stand orange and striped, looking rosy-coral in the washed out halogen porch light. Different but similar to his estranged wife's home. Mosquitoes dance around the lamp. Crickets are a chorus in the trees and bushes of the property. A stereotype of the American South that is much richer in reality, as unique as any city in Europe.

Beau comes back through the screen from the porch door, which despite its shoddy appearance is entirely silent save the slam of it when it's let go. (*Beau takes care of his things, like his son, no matter how poor the quality. It's* his *, isn't it, and shouldn't you do the same for* yours *?*) He's taken off his work shirt, only clad in a tank top and his jeans and boots now. The man would be at home in a Tenessee Williams production, but more richly so in that there is no artifice - this is him at his core, not a caricature. There's no gun that he can see, so perhaps he won't try to kill Hannibal tonight after all. Hannibal also notes with interest he doesn't seem to carry a phone. (*You are disappointed - what an easy path to Will it could have been.*)

He seems resigned to talking, steeling himself against Hannibal's curiosity. Another point in Beau's favor towards Will's demeanor.

"I ain't tellin' you shit 'bout where that boy is. I don't even know where he at m'self. I s'pect you know that already. A smart dressed man like you," says Beau, coming to sit on the porch of his home, the matching wicker chair squeaking under his weight. In hand, two glasses, different in shape, and his chilled handle of Wild Turkey from the corner store. He sets them down on a stack of milk crates next to him, and pulls a carton of cigarettes from his back pocket. "You mind?" he asks.

He shakes his head no, even as he sighs. Typically yes, but tonight looks to be a series of necessary exceptions. Even as Beau lights his cigarette, he puts it behind his ear, and pours the alcohol into both glasses. Hannibal would decline to take it when he's already had as much as he has, but what little he's realized of Beau is enough to know it would be hugely offensive not to. Offense doesn't roll off him like it does Will.

No indeed, Beau absorbs it to make something black and angry inside until he needs it.

"S'always just been me n' him in the past," says Beau, taking his first drag of smoke. "I s'pect for m'self it's jus' me now. We talk. We ain't up each other's ass - s'not that kind of a relation *ship* ," he adds with a harsh pop. He takes another drag of his cigarette, tapping the butt on the edge of his chipped highball glass. Hannibal can see what looks like a maker's mark on the side of it - a gift, from a well-to-do son that doesn't know what to give a not so well-to-do man, but knows he enjoys his drink. Perhaps something from a holiday where social convention outweighs either man's sense of practicality. It's the thing to do, giving nice gifts.

Hannibal traces with his gaze the fall of cigarette ash to the porch, glowing in the dark. “Do you think him so solitary, like you?” he presses, turning his own glass in hand. Another mismatched item, an old fashioned glass made of crystal, filled with a chilled two-fingers of bourbon whiskey. Good china for the guests. Hannibal takes no offense - it’s truly all that Beau Graham has to offer, and is the favorite of his home.

He continues. “Determinedly alone by choice, in a city where no one would know to recognize him? You’ve had to be very selective with your solitude even here in Savannah, Mr. Graham. You’ve wandered the Earth to and fro for many years already, going back and forth on it.”

“Not many places left t’ hide s’what you’re sayin’.”

“As you like. Although I would challenge the idea that you’re one to run and hide.” Hannibal takes a drink. It’s flat, but distinctive. Combined with the powerful cigarette smell, he’s surprised to still be able to still distinguish things about it, expecting his sensitivity to have long since died at the bar. Spicy, vanillic, on a base not far off from isopropyl alcohol. He could sterilize with this. He’ll survive it.

“M’not. Just movin’ along because the scenery gets old and the rap sheet too long. Won’t be startin’ with the hidin’ today neither.”

Hannibal smiles. “Am I something to run and hide from?”

“According to m’ boy, one o’ many. According t’ me, somethin’ that needs dealin’ with.”

Dealing with . Hannibal leans against the back of the chair, taking another sip of the whiskey and listening to the creak of the wicker reeds. “Does he often speak of such things?”

Beau is looking at him, cigarette in his mouth again, dark eyed and heavy brows pulling together. It’s very like Will’s face when puzzling through something, turning to his memory rather than his soft-faced peaceful intuition. (*It is a lovely face, marble-smooth for seconds before reality comes crashing back in, and some stranger’s delight in horror is recognizably not his own again* .)

“Around here,” Beau finally sighs, smoke billowing out, “the more significant somethin’ is, the less you want t’ talk ‘bout it. Good manners, not airin’ out your dirty laundry. Good manners, not askin’ after it.”

Hannibal smiles. “Then I have been very rude to your son. Psychiatry isn’t particularly kind to secrets.” Neither is Hannibal.

“Hell, if y’all ain’t been rude, I don’ know what would make that boy up and leave a respect’ble career. Obsessed wit’ the niceties, wit’ the rule of *law* growin’ up. Always embarrassed by his ol’ man gettin’ put in the drunk tank. Embarrassed ‘bout feelin’ too much, worried ‘bout pickin’ up bad *habits* .”

“Surely he understood. No one understands quite like he does.”

Beau snorts again, throwing back another round. Hannibal mimics him, wincing and then breathing around the burn of it on exhale. In vino veritas. “Understood, sure, sure,” Beau says. “But approvin’? Wantin’ to throw down? Even if he wanted it, even if he was sportin’ for an honest fight, I s’pect he wouldn’t. Built a life on playin’ opposites with his ol’ man. Except the fishin’ and the boats, whatever ol’ Beau does, Will does it different.”

Hannibal rolls his neck. “And what would you have him do the same as yourself?” he asks. “I’ve done quite a bit of reading on you - it’s true, Will doesn’t discuss you much, even in context. But your history paints an unattractive picture.”

“And what d’you think you understand ‘bout me?” Beau turns his gaze down to his glass, scratching at his stubble with a rough hand. The hairs glow like filaments, backlit. “As I understand it, ‘dis is our first meetin’. S’no good makin’ *assump* tions.”

“You cast a long shadow with the local police department wherever you go, Beau,” says Hannibal, draining his glass. “Your *long rap sheet* , I believe you called it. For all that it’s not that kind of *relationship* , Will seems to spend a lot of time paying bail. What are we to make of that?”

Beau twists his mouth into a bitter grimace. “I spend a lot o’ time payin’ out just desserts. Y’all don’ need to make nothin’ o’ it. If the boy don’ want to pay it, I ain’t twistin’ his arm. I jus’ call so he know where to find me.”

(*Good, dutiful Will, can’t leave a stray behind. The dogs must be his own vice, transferred to a father who means well but just can’t quite* do *well* .)

“Do you think yourself exempt from his stewardship?” The chair creaks, and Hannibal thinks of the splinters that will be in his trousers after all this.

“Not his job to mind me. I’m his father, ain’t I?”

“Who does mind you, Beau?” asks Hannibal, falling into old habits, looking for weakness - it’s always a joy to find a vein. “Husband to a manically depressed teenager, burdened with a young son that feels too much, maybe slightly too like his mother? Never met a fight you didn’t like, ” Hannibal lilts. “Never met a bottle that wasn’t a friend. Will's likely catching up to you on that one - quite the habit even when he was holding down a respectable job.”

Beau laughs once, dryly, and stands from his chair.

He recognizes what’s happening a little too late - the pain is too immediate. Beau’s fist is unerringly accurate and quick, thumb pressed hard against the outside of his fingers, knuckles like piano hammers. Beau’s struck him directly in his left eye, in a punch that knocks Hannibal nearly clear out of his chair. Hannibal at first mostly sees flashes, and soon a white hot flare that follows after.

The dog barks twice, standing abruptly to move away from both men. It is raucous in the otherwise quiet neighborhood.

Hannibal stumbles back, reaching a hand up to his nose and to feel the edges of his cheekbone. It takes a moment, but when he opens his eye, he is relieved to see at all. As the swelling rushes in, he’s not wholly convinced he hasn’t gotten a skull fracture for his trouble.

Beau merely spits, settles his startled dog, and pours himself more whiskey.

“Y’all best keep things like that t’ yo’self. Never met a fight I didn’ like - you goddamn right ‘bout that,” he says, drinking. He looks at his hand, where the knuckles have split, wipes them half-heartedly on the side of his tank top where blood reaches out in little rough edged lines. He’s entirely unbothered by the injury - Hannibal marvels at the old man, at the snowy whiteness in his sideburns that light up in the halo of the porch lamps. “You might want to keep your shrink shit to yo’self - liable to run into some trouble. S'not *appreciated* .”

(*Jaundiced old bastard, wrathful maker of damaged hesitant sons, you’ll string him up, make a spinnaker of him, always relentlessly pushing his boat forward with the force of the wind that stirs up behind him* -)

Hannibal also spits, tasting metal. He assesses. Teeth are all in place. Nose is straight, but hurting on the high left interior side of the nose bridge. Vision is clear, though flashes in the retina suggest a need to rest his eye and reassess in a few hours. He finds himself at a crossroads. On one hand, he doesn’t suffer violence to his person, no matter how justified. On the other hand, what did he expect?

Sorry, he needs to prod this wound Beau drags around in house titles and buried police reports. Sorry about his abnormal girl-bride - was she very young when Beau got her with a child that her religious parents were never going to love for the shame of it? Sorry, did an uneducated poor man of the South know what mental healthcare his ailing naive sweetheart would need to make it through a pregnancy, through postpartum, through a drunkard’s inconstant affection? Sorry about his kind-hearted son that’s so afraid to bite others with his need to express his thoughts honestly that he’ll bite himself instead. Sorry about needing to drag his accidental get across the rural waters, too uneducated to beat a mean system, too angry to avoid it. Sorry that Beau’s temporary unhappiness tells Hannibal more than a single word out of the man’s mouth, and his discomfort is secondary to Hannibal’s driving need to know more about Will. So much of this is speculation. So much of this he feels is certainly true. (*None of it needs to be said out loud.*)

Beau’s gaze is hot and unrelenting, watching him puzzle it out.

He licks his mouth, presses the stinging tissue beneath his eye. Muscles bunch, scenarios collide in his mind's eye, and the burn of the alcohol in his stomach turns nauseating together with the stinging of his face.

He has trespassed - what kind of justice would killing him actually be? Hannibal's catalogue of sins is long as well, likely 20 years shyer and still more heinous - he suspects he would not like them listed as bullet points either, like they somehow explained him, and that he was just a product of a sad time instead of predacious innate thoughts.

Hannibal cracks his neck.

(*You are what you were going to be, no matter the bullet points.*)

When Hannibal comes to his decision, he smiles, and finds himself laughing. Hannibal grins widely, even as his eye aches at the stretch of it. He can't remember the last time he respected a response like that. "Like calls to like," he sighs between heavy pained breaths and airless laughter, holding the side of his head still. "I had thought you a man of exceptional instability based on what little I heard, but I see now you are simply exceptionally savage and selfish. It's a wonder Will is as mellow as he is when I look at you, Beau Graham."

"You sayin' he hasn't struck you yet?"

Hannibal shakes his head, wincing. "As you mean it, no. Given the opportunity and inclination? I think it's likely in the future."

(*You have been struck - you were struck when you met him. You are struck by each sight of him.*)

"Blood's blood. Will's mine, and he jus' like me, god bless 'em. He come by his meanness by the usual means," Beau adds, shrugging his shoulders. Hannibal listens to the wicker creak behind him. "He don' need to adopt mine too."

“You think he’s not in control of himself?”

“I think he’s as in control o’ himself as he knows t’ be. I stay away t’ not make it any harder on him than it already is.”

Beau pours then both another round, handing Hannibal his glass. A peace offering, he supposes. He takes it, and lets it rinse his mouth. It brings to mind the aftermath of his fight with Tobias Budge - Will is just as absent now as he was then. The crickets chirp on. The dog sighs as he lays back down on the porch. Peace temporarily restored.

"I can’t find him," Hannibal says, not meaning to.

Beau smiles. "You wouldn' of come lookin' if you could."

When Hannibal walks away from the house for the night, cheekbone still aching and tender, Beau watches for a long time in the glow of the white halogen light as he drifts into the gloom. He lifts one hand as a send-off, back to reticence and taciturn silence, with a small crooked smile. The house fades between trees and cars, and blocks of suburban sprawl, and still Hannibal feels like the fiery greenness of his eyes is still centered on his turned back.

Reluctantly, he admits he likes Beau.

Will is different from his father, for all that there are similarities. Where Will falls into exposing his vulnerability even as he protects it, snarling, Beau is as solid and unyielding as stone even in his old age, made lean by years of anger and patience in equal measure, hiding nothing of his suspicion and willingness to hurt. Not protective per se, but territorial. Hannibal is a predator crossing his borders, sniffing out vulnerabilities, and must be cast out.

Hannibal has to acknowledge that this trip hasn’t played out quite as he expected. Beau is not a man he recognizes in Will - less reserved, less interested in the appearance of normalcy.

None can say if the manic-eyed Evelyn from the yearbook photo would be a face he recognizes in him either, even if Hannibal is certain some measure of his strange psychology is a product of his Cajun French mother. There's a scattering of sadnesses in Will's past that Will is a by-product of. Hannibal's own is similar, but where he pushes against it, Will shapes an identity from it - proud Southern boy, always struggling against his most basic nature by blood. His resistance to embracing violence is more apparent in context to Hannibal now. It's not just learned; it's ingrained with decades of habit, always the refrain of "I shouldn't, I shouldn't, but don't forget that I can."

So Beau stays away to leave Will room to be whatever he is meant to be, separate from his empathy, separate from the constant bleeding color of his father's lifestyle. Hannibal can respect that.

(*You could never do the same.*)

Walking down the sun-cracked pavement in the dark, Hannibal reluctantly also acknowledges that he has had perhaps a bit too much of Beau Graham's execrable whiskey. Poor quality spirits does not mean lesser impact spirits, and he is not equipped to match pour for pour with a functioning severe alcoholic, no matter his successes elsewhere in life.

When he arrives back to his hotel along the river side in the downtown core, he slides out of his sweat-soaked clothing into his pajamas, drinks the entirety of the spring water from a bottle next to the bed, and pushes out the sensation of spinning until he is able to sleep. The coolness of the air conditioner is a balm. The sheets are a kindness to his stinging nose and cheek.

He misses three calls while he sleeps to what is for him the unusual hour of 8:30 am - one patient, giving a 72 hour notice of cancellation (*always so fastidious, Mrs. Errol, always so nervous about breaking rules*), Alana checking in on him before her morning commute to Quantico, and an unknown Virginia phone number.

Alana's call he is somewhat surprised by, but Hannibal supposes that it has been nearly a week since his impromptu trip, and he has made no real effort to maintain the niceties. It is

tiring and his thoughts are in another land from hers. The hour is strange though. He wonders at what she would want to discuss.

The unknown number is also strange. A quick Google search for phone number listings says it may belong to a previous loan company in the Arlington area as of some time last year. Hannibal looks away from the call log, and thinks no further on it.

(*A ship passing in the night - how you would regret the truth and intent of it.*)

As suspected, Beau Graham's violent parry to being rendered down has instead rendered unto Hannibal a coal black, scarlet, and plum-purple bruise around his left eye, where a few darker spots speak to where Beau has split his knuckles. (*How casually he had wiped away blood, seen a dozen of a dozen times!*) Hannibal fancies it looks like the fleshless orbital round of the skull, and his red eye blazes out from the shiny-black damaged skin. The surface capillaries of the whites are crushed with pressure, subconjunctival hemorrhaging turning his gaze more devilish.

(*Will titters nervously from memory - "And it's hard to focus when you're thinking, um, "Oh, those whites are really white", or, "He must have hepatitis", or, "Oh, is that a burst vein?"*)

"Can I get you some ice for that? You look like you had a rough weekend, sweetheart," says the flight attendant, when he returns to the airport, seated in his row and dozing softly before takeoff. When Hannibal smiles or squints to pay closer attention, his face aches terribly. When he closes his eye, phantom retinal static is a kaleidoscope. It's wonderful even as it annoys him.

Hannibal smiles, and feels the pressure of the swelling in the side of his sinuses and in the nasal ridge. He should take a look at it for additional damage when he gets home. "Family visit," he says, flippant and amused. "I hear Americans sometimes call it a shovel talk."

The flight attendant, Shayla as her badge reads in gold tones and navy blue, smiles with bright white teeth that glow from her berry colored lips. "Every good southern daddy gives

one. Better a fist than a shotgun," she says, handing him a requested glass of passable Sauvignon Blanc. "That would have done a bit more than black your eye. You sure I can't get you something for that, sir?"

"Oh, I am quite proud of it," says Hannibal. "It gives me something to think about."

And it's true. He presses his index and middle finger to the bruise's edge, and contemplates lineages until the plane is smoothly gliding down to Baltimore Washington International. He contemplates the commonality of running from past decisions, doomed to repeating them over and over again.

"So when do we talk about disappearing for a week and not touching base for the duration of it?" asks Alana, sitting primly on the living room settee. She has declined a drink tonight. "Or maybe why you look like you lost a brawl?"

"Do we talk about it?" asks Hannibal. He's surprised to feel defensive of it - his knowledge is hard won, if ill-gotten.

"No," she says, turning her head just so, bird-like. "I suppose we don't."

She doesn't stay for dinner this time. Hannibal doesn't ask.

When June rolls in, the temptation to begin a new sounder is very great - idle hands do not suit Hannibal, and there's no immediate outlet for the energy building up in him.

He lives in the certainty that Will is on the West Coast, though in what capacity and what region is unknown - Boise, Idaho is still far enough from the edge that making a guess would

be useless. He has postulated that southern California would be intolerable to the younger man; too frivolous, too many people outside the northern reaches above San Francisco. It doesn't feel right. However, that leaves him a mere 923 miles of terrain between Bodega Bay and Port Angeles, assuming Will has not moved inland, or included Alaska as a potential territory. As a man with little need for urban stimulation, Hannibal can't discard it as an option. In all his years in the United States, it is still unimaginably large and full of pockets of rural living.

The math doesn't fall in his favor. He cannot give chase to Will at the moment with the information that he has, and that is infuriating. Hannibal contemplates returning to Beau Graham in the south, and simply shaking the information out of him, but Hannibal suspects Beau might very well try to kill him next time. While that is exciting prospect, it doesn't particularly help him, and Hannibal is tired of fruitless endeavors.

So. A return to old pursuits - maybe a longer term project, like curing meat.

Out the rolodex comes, and out comes the story of the crow and the pitcher.

A Mr. Adam Herderson, who had cut his bird-loving patient Iris off from a street parking spot in the previous year, finds himself used as mass in a fountain basin of pond water at Patterson Park to bring it level to the ground's edge to drink from. He has it on good authority that the mourning doves and corvids prefer to not reach so far down for sustenance. Hannibal removes the meat of the gastrocnemius and soleus, and fills Mr. Henderson's mouth with pebbles. One likes to keep with the details.

A message in patience for him as well as Mr. Henderson. Keep filling slowly to offset your available resources - soon, a triggered reward.

Frustration drives Alana back to his house eventually.

Their relationship is tepid these days, and Hannibal finds it to be a relief to have her profiling regularly, and each pursuing different interests. It is the sort of continental drift that he favors,

what little simmering flirtation and attraction they have diverting to personal pursuits. (*You cannot shake the sensation of theft these days when thinking of her. You didn't even want her so badly you would want to be punished for it.*) But still, they are friends, and Hannibal wonders if it won't just naturally resume the gravity of their past interactions in the absence of mutual attraction.

"No leads, no evidence, and weirdly no press coverage," she sighs, turning her beer on the kitchen island counter. "I'm trapped in this work cycle on the Chesapeake Ripper that even Will found challenging, and the only real benefit is no Freddie Lounds at my front door for once like a bad hat you can't get rid of."

"You merely need the right outfit," he quips, mouth quirking at the corners. Hannibal chops green onions thinly, preparing a ponzu sauce for soba noodles. Warm days call for cold foods, and his smoked and dry-cured meat will not be ready for some time yet. So be it - he can wait until melon is properly in season, and pair it with a dry Riesling.

He has of course noticed the lack of Tattlecrime meddling in the investigation. No headliners with strange capslock emphasis, no making fun of the FBI, the Baltimore Police Department, or even Jack Crawford, Freddie Lounds' favorite whipping boy with no Will Graham to suffer her attentions. It had been disappointing, but Hannibal notes that Freddie hasn't been up to much of anything since early June at best - perhaps even Freddie Lounds takes impromptu vacations.

(*You hoped for a reaction - not necessarily from her. She just would have helped.*)

Along the Maryland coast sits another property. Hannibal is beginning to feel quite kleptocratic with all of his real estate purchases on the eastern reaches of the United States, but this one, unlike its most recent brethren in Virginia, is occupied.

"You really don't have to bring me groceries," says Abigail, as hale and whole as last week. She has been standing in the courtyard, letting the sea breeze whip her dark hair around. With her fair ruddy cheeks and brooding nature, she could be a Eustacia Vye, wandering the heath of coastal England as an outcast and witch, fresh from the pages of Thomas Hardy. (*You collect such lovely things - you know she is all the lovelier in her reluctant wickedness* .) The

absence of her ear is not notable - he has been very careful to preserve her vanity, even under the circumstances that would have handicapped it.

“It is only right for you to have company on occasion,” says Hannibal, unbagging fresh produce on the counter of the kitchen, examining boxes of pre-made snacks that she has requested for the coming weeks. They are disgusting and full of sugar, but he doesn’t think that she will cook much for herself when he is gone again, and it is a small comfort. He thinks he will be gone for some time, and Abigail knows better than to leave the house when trouble will find her.

(*You have ensured you know when she leaves, for all that she can’t see how. Her intuition is good - she doesn’t try.*)

Hannibal’s appetite demands inspiration from May’s ventures, as Abigail was not able to safely travel with him. Tonight they turn their thoughts and plates to the South. Perhaps dumplings with mirepoix and tender chicken thigh. Out come carrots, onions, celery, and from the knife block comes a santoku knife.

Across from him, Abigail watches his hands especially. Hannibal feels the corners of his mouth lift, amused.

He begins preparations for dinner with a roux, methodical figure eights turned with a wooden spoon in an enamelled white cast-iron skillet. After a few moments, he gestures for Abigail to take over the pattern of motions. He has other tasks at hand, and only a small amount of patience for her doe-like hesitance. Once he is assured she has the right rhythm, he goes back to his knife.

“Our wayward friend continues to wander for another week,” he says, lining the vegetables up in parallel to the walnut cutting board.

“You don’t always have to tell me about him. I can assume that no updates means that there’s still no Will.” Her eyes are following her figure-eights now, a little glazed over. She is often pleased for his company, but tonight seems moody. Being an adolescent is tiring. Being an adolescent with no social input must be mind-numbing.

Hannibal begins with the carrots. “I wish for you to engage in the situation. There is very little other than it to engage with, unless you are including your online courses, which I already know you have been skipping over the home biology labs.” He examines a carrot round, and finds the width pleasing. “But if you wish to be treated like a child, I can oblige. We already have a new round of nutritionless sweets and snacks to reinforce the image.”

She smiles, all teenage amusement tied up with resentment. “Gourmet Snickers bars still taste like a regular Snickers, did you know? I watched a YouTube video on it.”

“Is that what you’re doing when not doing your labwork?” he asks, dicing the onion rapidly - he has done this hundreds and hundreds of times before.

She shrugs. “Gotta do something. You’ve got me cloistered like a nun out here - only thing we’re missing is a chapel and probably an infirmary, maybe a mysterious shipwreck survivor in need of shelter so we can *really* set the right tone,” says Abigail, pushing her hair back over a shoulder, watching the roux grow brown. “Got bored looking through Tattlecrime comments for clues. All I can really figure is that she had a couple of leads on cases not related to the Behavioral Science Unit that she was interested in lately, and that she occasionally guest writes for a big beer blog.”

It’s true that Hannibal asks this of her - Abigail has always been good at flushing out prey, no matter the father figure. It would be a shame to let her uncanny awareness go to waste in the name of simple schooling, but it is too bad that he can’t offer higher praise right now for it. It is a disappointment to feel another person exiting from his sphere of influence without much effort as Freddie has done.

Her motions slow, the roux beginning to properly simmer. “I’d like to disappear too,” she says, both abruptly and matter of factly. Hannibal can tell she has sat on that statement for a while - she is entirely too nonchalant for it to be anything other than grievously important, if a little too honest. “Freddie and Will have the right idea. I know that’s not really an option though.”

Hannibal stops chopping briefly, looking up to consider her. “Add one cup of flour to your right, and a cup of water,” he says blithely, and continues staring, drifting from her pinched brow to her deliberately averted eyes. “You’ve disappeared as well as you can, given the circumstances,” he tacks on, feeling the weight of the knife again and rocking it through the produce beneath it. “Jack Crawford has no reason to look for you, and here we can contemplate brighter futures for you that do not involve Garett Jacob Hobbs. You can be someone else now that doesn’t carry that responsibility.”

(*That is how you know she is still a child - you must carry the responsibility for her.*)

“Can I?” she asks, watching the flour incorporate. “Seems to me like you need Abigail Hobbs, not some normal dumb teenager who can make acidity filters with cabbage juice.”

“If we are to completely divorce you of context, even to me, then we need not perform this charade at all,” he replies, leveling his gaze to her. “Perhaps you’d like to explain your handling of Nicholas Boyle after all, and the litany of sad, brown-haired girls that have allowed you to live as long as you have.” Hannibal adds his own skillet next to the one Abigail hovers over, adding oil and lighting the burner. “You certainly won’t be the first to throw an accusation against me, though I must admit, I will be substantially less inclined to stage your release from a psychiatric hospital than your predecessor.”

“Because you don’t have plans for me?” she jabs.

Hannibal increases the heat on the stove top, turning the skillet in his hand to spread the olive oil. “Because I had plans for you, and both you and the other recipient insist on going off-script to your own detriment.”

She frowns, pushing her hair back over an ear that’s not there anymore. A nervous habit, still too ingrained to forget. “You’re the only person with the script. We’re just trying to decide if we want to be part of the production. If I had a do-over where Dad was dead and I didn’t make the same mistakes, I’d probably vanish too. Build another life, someone that’s not Abigail Hobbs.”

Hannibal thinks on that - Abigail Hobbs, freed again in a mid-century dated kitchen for a third time, filling the gaps in the tile with her blood. Will Graham, rushing around the corner, wielding his fear and his gravitational pull to savagery through a standard issue hand gun. Will Graham, downing the paternal monster that forever stands in Abigail’s periphery, kitchen knife in hand. Freedom, she thinks. Inevitability, thinks Hannibal.

What mistakes did Abigail truly make that would realign her fates if done differently? The root of her problem isn’t so much Nicholas Boyle, or not being better at hiding her own selfish nature and skill. Those immaterial properties ingratiate her to Hannibal, make him

want to shelve her like a book that he can take out and look at from time to time, but he didn't truly need to possess her the way he does now.

It's Will's ersatz fatherhood that locks her into his sights, that brings Hannibal to the hospital room to await discovery by the younger man, to continuously guide Abigail so that Will soon has nothing but wicked things like her and crimes scenes and illness (*and you*) in his life. Then perhaps Will could see the naturalness of it, and Hannibal's command of it. Everything Will needs, acceptance at last for a man always on the run from his born and bred understanding and capacity for violence. Hannibal strikes him with blindness as God strikes Paul the Apostle, and guides him with hands down the decumanus maximus.

(*He was to meet you in the House of Judas and be restored, scales falling from his eyes. It has not come to pass, for all your command of wickedness has fallen into place elsewhere. A truly unfortunate outcome.*)

It would have been much simpler to solve the problem of needing no witnesses by simply letting his hand sit a little too loosely on her ruinous throat in that kitchen in Minnesota. Hannibal would not have kept her had Will not needed to keep her - everything that follows after is Hannibal being responsible for his things, keeping them polished and bright. Really, there's nothing she could have done.

He transfers the onions to the pan.

"In another life you would be dead," says Hannibal, methodically searing the onions until they brown to the caramel darkness he prefers. When he pours a splash of white wine into the buttered pan for a touch of acidity, they hiss.

"Maybe that would have been better," she says, still watching his hands, still stirring the roux, grown thicker and dark and ready.

At night, another dream.

He is sitting on Beau Graham's front porch, dog underfoot, glass in hand. This time, no whiskey, but a wide tulip brandy glasses that he keeps in the study full of rich amber liquid - his cognac. It's hot and sweltering, but dark, with only the shadow of the day lilies can be perceived from over the porch railing in the absence of the porch light. He is seated in one of the two wicker chairs.

To his left, the other chair sits vacant, with a matching glass sitting atop the milk crates. Expectant of company. (*A little obvious for you, don't you think?*) Beau must be inside the bungalow sleeping.

He spends many hours listening to the crickets, sipping. It's strangely comfortable but lonesome, thinking of a world at rest for the Grahams, alive, even if out of sight. Hannibal wants to enumerate their safe places, watch slowed nocturnal breathing, consider their dreams. Will is beyond him, but perhaps here in the rotting humid eaves of the house, Beau is in reach.

He considers his options. Does he intrude through the door? Does he try at the windows again? Does he take this place, only tangentially belonging to Will Graham, and try to possess it like all else? He could certainly afford it - he could buy it out from Beau Graham's landlord, keep it like a lobster trap in familiar warm waters. Beau would be none the wiser, though perhaps infuriated enough to maybe blacken Hannibal's other eye if he ever found out.

Evinrude shuffles beneath his feet, and he shifts his legs to give the dog room to lay his head down again. The hound's ears are very smooth against his clothed foot, a pattern of speckled stars down the back and into his neck - Hannibal must be careful to not step on them. Hannibal pours another glass of cognac for himself, and shuts his eyes against the nagging picture of the empty chair and matching drink.

When he wakes, he is still tired, and motes of dust float on the sunlight sneaking into the room, equally empty.

Do you think the admin is dead? asks AnIntellectualObserver55, first in the newest of article comments today.

It's a good question.

Despite Abigail's own vigil on the website, Hannibal finds he is still waiting for Tattlecrime's previously impeccable posting schedule to resume, and opens the website for himself tonight. It seems a shame to have nothing written on his Aesop fable when he has intentions of continuing lessons in a series. Children's stories for children that can't understand him without their seeing-eye dog of a missing person.

When there is still nothing new posted clear into August, not even so much as a comment rebuttal which she has previously been most industrious with providing, he begins to wonder if something is grievously wrong with Miss Lounds. Hannibal also thinks how unfortunate it is that he doesn't get to deal her final hand himself. (*She's entertained you so much over the years, you feel it's your duty to give her a proper news breaking send off. None of that statistical probability nonsense that naturally flows into her work as a journalist working in unsavory conditions - you want fireworks and bold print for her as a thank you for the sartorial comedy.*) The comments section on her last article, dated June 2nd, are growing in volume and conspiracy.

Clearly deep state interference , says ZombiePrepper92660. ***She's digging up all the good stuff, and now she's been black bagged. Sad!***

Hannibal smiles. There's a certain schadenfreude in reading the uninformed opinions. He loves them all the more when they are so certainly and radically off base.

Come back Freddie, we need to know what you know about the man in the park! Is it another Ripper piece or someone new???

Lol u guys, maybe she got a real job.

Hannibal smiles at that as well. Unlikely. Not a woman made for listening to other people, not a person equipped to deal with the needs and desires of superiors. Hannibal admires her, even as he understands she lives a hardened lifestyle to perpetuate her career.

But it does beg the question - does someone else know what Freddie Lounds is up to these days?

"Called in a missing persons report, but she doesn't have a known home address, just a P.O. box," says Byron, again the faithful keeper of records on a phone call the next evening. "Her parents seem to think this is kind of a long time for her to go AWOL, even with her nomadic lifestyle. I see an eviction proceeding here, but police reports say that she was absent, and the parents picked up her belongings at some point. Potentially a couple of credit defaults, but I can't really get into that one without some more detailed personal info."

Hannibal tilts his head into the phone, even as he looks at the growing comments again the night following. "That won't be necessary - Miss Lounds has always been something of a mystery and a problem to law enforcement. It's very possible she has finally found trouble she can't talk her way out of and is evading pursuit."

"She's had a smattering of warrants before, but nothing crazy right now. I'll add her to my assistant's update do-to list."

"Please do," he says, and they part for the night.

After hours, the lack of information continues to nags at him - he goes so far as to even ask Alana about it via text. They have not been on dinner sharing terms between her increased work hours with the FBI while Jack Crawford contends with his wife, and an ebbing tide of interest in making plans for it.

But texts, yes. He can spare that.

Not a word from her in weeks. Alana admits. ***Jack thinks it's bad luck even bringing her up, but he's also not been able to really dig into it. Bella's on her last days, and he's not at work much and I don't want to encourage him to be anywhere but home.***

So yet another lead that goes nowhere for him this year, regardless of the subject. Hannibal is beginning to grow tired of these repeated slow disappointments. Tattlecrime sits in perpetuity, unmarked by time save the concerns of ZombiePrepper92660, intellectual observers with pretentious online handles, and other forgettable ignorants that have plenty of opinions and very little substance.

Hannibal sighs irritably. Maybe he is casting his net too specifically - what did Abigail say about guest writing elsewhere?

The Barley and Hop House:

Covering The Best of Beers from Small Town America

A very lovely logo of a coat of arms with hop vines and a goat standing reguardant sits in clean brown linework at the top of the website. On a contributor list, Freddie Lounds' picture stands out about halfway down - she is wearing sunglasses that make her more bug-like than she is in reality, holding a pint of something dark with a clean foam top. The environment is some sort of a festival. Hannibal has never really thought of her in this context, and finds himself absolutely tickled at the idea. Freddie Lounds, journalist of only the most heinous of crimes, and also writer of commentary on the growing saison style revolution in the DC Metro area.

Alas, Freddie's calling has always been to be a food blogger, Hannibal thinks with a growing scythe for a smile.

The volume of content she writes is almost as prolific as her Tattlecrime coverage. She has clearly leveraged her out-of-town research for her crime journalism to hit as many local pubs and breweries as her budget and time allows. Hannibal finds it's very admirable - he hopes he gets an opportunity to ask her about a particularly reverent article she writes about a Trappist brewery operation in Boston, holding the distinction of being the only American producer by merit of being a proper Benedictine Trappist Abbey.

(*"No, it doesn't count to be styled as one," she expounds vehemently. "You can only call it champagne if it's from Champagne, France. You can only call it Trappist if it's made by*

Trappist monks, folks. The method *is the product, not the flavor."*)

It is of note that her articles do not continue past May, last covering a mid-spring event in Alexandria. Her comments, however, seem to continue right up to the end of the month. Where she has always been an industrious keeper of her own website's comments, she is practically rabid here in the frequency and tone of her responses, clearly more comfortable making concrete statements in regards to alcohol than she ever has been with drawing distinct inalienable lines with murder accusations. (*Less potential lawsuits, surely.*)

Standing in line for a beer release is retarded , she quips in response to one of the other blog contributors. It is a heavily liked and favorited comment thread, unattached to her own actual writing. She appears to have a very heated debate with one Russell Evans, the Coastal Oregon expert and editor. ***All they're typically making is another trash IPA that a fruit was briefly breezed over to impart some "infusion" with all the impact of a fart. It's just an artificially rarified fancy can that some bro is going to sell on eBay for $500 or whatever the going rate is these days.***

Crude, definitely, but Hannibal can read it like she's in the room saying it herself. It's terribly amusing to see her use her savage wit on something other than Will who has no patience for it and is prone to his own scathing replies, or Jack Crawford who listens with the air of someone who would rather choke himself than listen to another word of it. It's even more amusing to see it in pursuit of gourmet commentary.

Russell Evans is incensed. ***I don't know how they do their new releases where you're at, but we come out as a community and have the actual palate to taste differences in small runs. Better in line than missing out and having to decide if you want to get it secondhand from someone's collection later.***

Hannibal sincerely doubts the veracity of his palate. So does Freddie.

Whatever you get your jollies from, man. Who am I to judge people still trying to get limited release Pliny the Elder, per your own wishlist? Do the other mods know you're that basic? writes Freddie. Another highly specific reference - he makes a note to look into it later. Hannibal suspects she started digging into this Russell character, drawing blood in her usual fashion. Curiosity drives him to click the user profile link.

Russell Evans is a red-headed brute of a man, heavily freckled, green eyed, and clearly a salt of the earth sort of person. He is very proud of his hometown of Astoria, Oregon, where he takes several mediocre photos of himself with seagulls, glasses of beer, and fishing trips with big coolers full of cans - presumably the limited release cans in question. Late middle-aged, not very handsome, some kind of blue collar rural type living vicariously through a blog he doesn't own, only writes the occasional bit for. An article of his, written in early May, celebrates the beer release that Freddie disdains. A separate image gallery is linked to it, and Hannibal follows its path, looking to complete his picture.

Dregs of cold looking old men with tall full glasses and smiles, something from an older country or simpler times. Their simple joy tastes of rye bread and roasted root vegetables, something served with sour cream. It's distasteful to him - Hannibal has left this sort of life behind in his youth, going from Paris to Florence to his days now in Baltimore and DC. He finds himself rapidly looking through the photos at the patrons and portrait style shots of pilsner glasses and coasters and other such extraneous detail that he almost misses it.

Someone has clearly volunteered to take a photo of Russell with his entourage - it's not a very good one, slightly crooked and the flash coming on too late, creating a red eye effect in most of the group. It is ugly but striking in comparison to the blandness of the others. The few people that are spared the lens distortion sit in the far corners, uncomfortable with being filmed or perhaps simply content to watch from the sides.

(*A girl hewn onto the head of a stag, missing purpose and affection. A letter of resignation, missing a phone number. A photo amongst hundreds, missing illumination. The devil is* ***always*** *in the details*.)

To Russell's right, slightly shadowed and shy smiled, is Will.

Will, looking hollow but cheerful while holding a dark beer. Will, looking reserved but putting on the very best of his masks of humanity, absorbing easy enjoyment from simpler people and trying on the every-man's suit of his father. The longer hair and the shapely short beard are very different, but Hannibal feels the conviction that it's him, looking like El Greco's Saint Dominic in prayer, his girl-mother Evelyn Fuselier's curling tresses more obvious than ever in this image. Present and important. Will is gaunt, but still vividly the man that Hannibal has spent hours pouring over in thought.

Hannibal very nearly breaks his tablet, standing with it in hand, fingers pressed hard enough to whiten.

Astoria, in brief research online, and briefer conversation with a rental property agent, is a seaside town, littered with the detritus of an ailing fishing industry, a port of call for cruises, and an assortment of tourism amusements as the edge of the Columbia River. A fun weekend trip for the city dwellers, home to the occasional provincial festival, and largely isolated despite its short distance to Portland and Seattle. Somewhere that a person shores up like flotsam on a wave crest.

The weather is often bad. A lot of people often fish. It looks like the end of the world, an Aegean Sea stretching out from Ithaca, and wrathful gods in the grey sea beyond it.

It's exactly what Hannibal would picture for Will.

More interesting to him than any of this is the method by which Hannibal finds this information, likely the exact same way that Freddie had - an accidental still frame taken in bad bar lighting. No rhyme or reason save that it is, indeed, a very small world, where small private interests intersect day in and day out to weave a tapestry.

The real question of that is not how this has come to pass - though Hannibal is willing to reconsider his previous assumptions that fate is just happy coincidences in a universe governed by a random, neglectful god. (*Perhaps in addition to neglectful he has a sense of humor like yours, and isn't that a terrifying proposition?*) The whole thing is fantastical by any metric.

No, the real question here is what has happened to Freddie, who certainly found exactly what Hannibal found and pursued it quickly after. It is August now, but it has been two months since her last known interaction with much of anyone, and the only secret commonality is a sad looking man at the edge of the western world who prolifically *hates* her. There is no conceivable way that she wouldn't have followed the trail and written extensively about it, if only to mock Will for having thoroughly abandoned everything and still been found by such a random incident. How pleased she must have been.

(*How pleased you are for the same. How excited you are, knowing neither of them could have been up to anything good. How wonderful it is, having a direction to point after so long adrift. How much you have to tell Will, how much you need him to sit and listen and understand that you are the creature that you always were, and there's no shame that he is as well. How much you want to sit in clarity together once more.*)

Of course Hannibal thinks of the creature that has made its home on the shores of Astoria, the one that wears Will Graham's tragic, lovely face. Hannibal still holds that Beau Graham is a likely testament to the kind of man that Will considers himself to be these days, though to what extent remains to be seen. Hannibal has nothing but a bad photo taken on a weekday night to draw conclusions from.

This doesn't stop him from drawing them.

The first observation: Will is thinner than he has been previously. Always angular and Roman in his features, Will's cheekbones are particularly cutting these days, speaking to poor diet or perhaps just poor health. Everything about the encephalitis treatment and ensuing psychiatric drugs will have put him off most meals. Hannibal can't imagine he has stopped drinking - even now his only picture is in a brewery.

The second observation: he is wearing a disguise of a sort all over again, and this is frustrating to Hannibal. The kind of life he has built around it is still yet a mystery, but the questions Hannibal has can only be understood in observing Will in his new habitat. Does he seek to blend in, a figure from his childhood that would be comfortable and thoroughly charted in character and purpose? Is it adopted from someone in Astoria? What is Will Graham in the absence of outside influence, and is that even possible for someone like him? Beau himself said that he avoided Will, to make easier his attempts to be a bland, wholesome man of known order. So vulnerable to external forces, that even his father runs too steadily into his waters, muddying them.

The third observation, and perhaps the one that poses the most doubt to Hannibal's otherwise clarity of purpose: Will would have not wanted to be found, and regardless of where Miss Lounds has found herself as a result, Hannibal doesn't think he'll be received with any sort of

relief. Their last brief contact was born out of Will's anger, and Hannibal, for all that he has come to understand that Will should not be led around by the nose, that he was wrong in his approach, and that he ravenously covets Will's company after months of gradual small deaths born of its absence, is a stranger to this man that avoids the recent past by adopting an older one.

Hannibal doesn't know if he would have done anything differently.

(*You are selfishly proud of what you wrought. The only fault in its design is that your intended audience never even looked at it again after the first glance to take more in, understanding but disliking it. Bedelia was right - Will gazed on your works and found them lacking, and doesn't* ***that*** *sting your pride?*)

It feels right to condense some of this frustration into words, and without thinking too much about it, Hannibal opens his work laptop to compose an email, queuing up 52hertzgraham@gmail.com with the trepidation of another curt reply, but certain that it's needed, before they come into each other's gravity again. Hannibal does not know if he'll ever be clear on what he should have done or if he would have done something different at all, but the ability to move past it to action is vitally necessary. Freddie graciously offers a starting point for the conversation, albeit not in her name specifically. (*You will save that for later - a stick already sharpened, waiting to poke at Will's temper.)*

Who is this man that leaves his systems and routine to rot? Who is this man who played a high stakes game when behind bars, but when of his own free agency again, folds immediately, leaving his bids at the table? Who is this person that Hannibal cannot go a day without thinking of, and are they even recognizable next to the icon that Hannibal has made of them? What does that man do? What shore does that man's mind take rest on, forgetting as Calypso bids, or never resting from thoughts of the one left behind? What shameful things does he do, and what beauty does he craft when the horror of his empathy is put to rest in deep waters?

(*How do you make him understand there is no place you would not have him near? How do you reconcile to yourself how you do destructive things to grow a companion from new richer soil, but that the thing that stood before the fire was beautiful as well?*)

Until next time , he signs off, and it is wonderful, knowing the hour is soon.

act 3 - reality doesn't impress me

The plaid is hard to mistake for anyone other than who it is. The dark greens and fine lines of red would be unwelcome in any other person's wardrobe, something dated or a costume. It's still a costume, but on the proud shoulders that wear it, it's more theatre than it is poor taste.

It doesn't stop Will from feeling like he's floated into a lucid dream, or the moments before a loss of time. Hannibal, sitting across from him, at home in Will's whiskey bar as Hannibal is in his own study, legs long, shoulders straight, predatorily casual like a leopard in a tree. Hannibal, opening up the bouquet of his glass with a quick swirl, as natural as a river's eddy. Hannibal, in Astoria, like Will has just been waiting to meet with him after work and talk of ugly things the way that Will Graham does, the way Hannibal Lecter sits and listens, rapt.

It's the soft sheen of the black tie that ends up grounding him in reality - it would pain Hannibal to know it reminds Will of Winston's nose, something that he wakes up to most days. It pains Will to know that's a comfort of a sort, like sinking into sheets fresh out of the dryer, or the crispness of a morning walk.

Everything has been bearable before now - now everything is piercing instead, and he can't draw in a proper breath. Back to the hospital, rendered down by a common cold. Back to Baltimore State, rendered down by mud, and insecurity, and the sick uncertainty of whether or not his teeth are predatory and capable of rending as well. Will isn't even sure what he should say - surely he's supposed to say *something* . His tongue feels thick, his stomach in knots, and he is for the moment stricken dumb.

(*He might be here to kill you. Is it a comfort to know that's an option, or were you hoping for something else?*)

"This is unusually public for you," Will blurts, despite some long consideration. It's not what he really wants to say, but it's as good as any other starting point, and besides, he wants to know. So he continues. "Not intimate enough for the kinds of conversations you like to hold. I had thought that was the point of literally hooking some poor bastard into a tangle of fishing flies so I could go home in January - needing to have a private conversation again."

Hannibal is smiling. “I think the present surroundings are a drastic improvement from Baltimore State, aren’t they?”

Will’s stomach rolls, and he looks to the bar, where everyone seems engrossed in their own night, thankfully. “Can we not talk about that here? You know, since it’s an intensely private thing that generally no one really wants to talk about in public? Do you think this is the time or place?” he hisses.

“Given your current home and vocation, I think it’s a fair guess to say it would never be the time and place, so I think it best to rip that scab off now,” says Hannibal, taking a sip of his drink, and rolling his tongue in his cheek and sighing. *That was the point* , Will thinks. “Besides, every child in the States is taught about stranger danger, are they not? You aren’t exactly the Will I am familiar with, for all that I recognize your face. We are both entering new territory tonight. Better for it to be in a public place, no? It’s a rather different man than the one that I knew that runs cross country for several weeks and then plays at normalcy for half a year that sits in front of me.”

“Plays at,” sneers Will.

“Yes, plays at, or have you lied about it long enough that you consider yourself to be like everyone else here?” Hannibal crosses his legs, staring up at the elk head mounted high above, smiling. “Well I suppose that’s inaccurate - adopted it, is a more likely scenario.”

(*He’s already putting his hands clear inside you - what do you think will happen if he ever honestly pulls them back out, fingers clenched?*)

“I’m afraid you’ve caught me at a bad time,” says Will. “I’ve avoided having to talk to much of anyone for months. One might say with extreme prejudice towards certain parties.”

Hannibal pointedly ignores the second half of that statement to Will’s irritation, looking around the room with an amused tilt to his mouth. “It would seem counterintuitive to attend a publicized brewery event when one doesn’t wish to speak, but perhaps the pastoral traditions are largely the same as they were in my youth and you all largely tip glasses to each other and stand in abject silence and grunt on occasion,” says Hannibal, swirling his glencairn glass in hand, armagnac merely a thin film in the bowl of the glass. He sounds like he’s enjoying himself. Why is he enjoying himself? Will almost finds that frustrating enough to just leave -

he's sick with nerves sitting here, waiting for the other foot to fall. "In which case you can proceed in perfect harmony with your isolation bothered by few people, but also perhaps a few dollars poorer."

"Well you're not wrong," says Will. If anything, it's awkwardly accurate to how most meetings with his erstwhile sailing group goes, though he would rather bite his tongue clear off than admit to how he spends his days.

The picture is a little clearer now. Literal pictures probably, and Will imagines himself sitting in a brewery as his usual surly self in a poor film exposure, no more disguised than having longer hair, less sweat, and a cleanly kept face. Skinned knuckles, oil under the fingernails, every bit as lost looking in this city as the next. Will Graham, tired looking, bent over with some new shame. (*You don't know it, but you haven't shamed yourself in this picture in question - even so, it wouldn't make it better for you.*) It's a profound relief to know Will himself hasn't fucked up his life again on his own terms with his perverse need to call Hannibal in the early hours, or emailing him thinking something positive is *ever* going to come from that.

It *is* a little frustrating to know it's something as simple as standing in the wrong freeze-frame, trying to be a friend to someone who doesn't know him at all. He's beginning to wonder if he was born under some kind of cursed planet - maybe Aquarius entering the seventh house of the moon or some other mystical bullshit. There's got to be something inescapably ruined about his fate to have a known urbanite and aesthete like Hannibal Lecter shown up in rural Oregon like the locals are hosting a chamber music festival, and really, isn't Will just so rude to not have waited for him before taking his seat?

Will rolls a shoulder, and hears his collar-bone click. It doesn't sit entirely right since the last gunshot wound - another thing he can thank Hannibal for, he supposes. "Is that how you found me? I didn't realize you were such a cicerone that you follow remote port of call towns for barleywine and pale ales like a Californian graduate student."

Hannibal smirks, clearly not stung but amused. "Perhaps not me, but an acquaintance of ours. I don't suppose you've seen our dear Ms Lounds, have you? I'm told she has a great deal of opinions on Pliny the Elder, albeit not the one that wrote the Naturalis Historia of old."

Will tries not to freeze, taking a measured light breath in and out - say it with him now, he doesn't know anything about that. (*"Liar," says Freddie from the banister at the bottom of*

the stairs in the house.)

“I suppose I should never be surprised by your name dropping Roman political figures - I’m sure you got plenty of time to practice in high school.”

Hannibal is delighted at both the rebuttal and the avoidance - it’s obvious in his rounded shoulders and the tilt of his head, chin ever pointed forward. “One must always be prepared to recognize bestiaries and elephants in the Alps in equal measure, especially when you are named in a multi-generational tradition that doesn’t hold up well in boarding schools. Are you really so flustered that we’ve turned to making fun of my name, Will? Should I respond in turn about how long your hair has gotten, or that your insistence on keeping a short beard with it is a sartorial effort that could desperately use peer review?”

“It’s the mode of fashion around here, or so I’m told,” says Will.

Will watches Hannibal for a moment.

He feels certain Hannibal knows that he’s seen Freddie - it’s clearly how the man himself has found his way here, so it stands to reason the indubitable and eternally irritating Freddie Lounds would have made the trip herself. Were it not for 18 bags of cement mix and the steady assurance that Freddie would have never had multiple laptops that could just be arbitrarily found by any nosy asshole, Will would almost feel uncomfortable with the idea that Hannibal might have found evidence of her trip to Portland, and to Astoria. He also gets the feeling that Hannibal is just casting lines, hoping Will knows about Freddie, or might be foolish enough to say something out of turn that tells a different story than the one Will’s memorized.

When the bartender breezes by with the whiskey menu, Hannibal orders them another round, taking the liberty of ordering the same for them both. Fair’s fair - Hannibal doesn’t know what he was drinking before he came in, but Will, despite wanting to refuse on principle, suspects anything he’s asked for will be interesting to try. (*It makes you uncomfortable, conceding that point. What else do you have to concede?*)

“Not used to buying this much of the nice stuff,” he says, fighting off the sensation of envy. Hannibal’s always so at home with people, and Will finds himself unexpectedly jealous of his ease in a place he’s had to work so hard to become comfortable with. “Coming to the bar was

designed to keep it down to a couple of good drinks, otherwise I could definitely take this party home."

Hannibal leans into the arm of the chair, considering his glass. "You have a good resource here - it would be unfortunate to neglect it for whatever it is that you're keeping in the cabinet at home."

"It's not all terrible," says Will, feeling slighted, and even now thinking of his exorbitant bottle of spirits sitting adjacent to the kitchen sanitizer under the sink. He likes to think he's keeping it humble in the company of other lesser solvents. (*Really you're keeping it to humble yourself - how dependent on it you are, the drink, the memory, the comfort of something familiar and special in the evenings when all you have is yourself and the dogs.*) "I just occasionally have to recalibrate to the cheap shit for a baseline sense of what I'm used to drinking. Make sure the old taste buds are still kicking," he says with the lift of his brows. "Still unpretentious."

"Do as you like, but you're more than able to have nice things," says Hannibal. "One can live humbly and grandly all at once - you simply frame which one you want to show depending on your audience."

"I actually enjoy my shitty whiskey," Will drawls. "It's consistent, unlike other recent elements of my life."

Will feels burned when Hannibal turns his full attention to him again, tracing the edges of Will's no doubt quiet frowning face with his luminous gaze. There's a reddish tint to them that brings to mind flecks of iron rust. He imagines it's what it's like to watch as a hot brand is brought closer, each fleck a piercing thought, and him, the livestock, pawing at the earth from his pin.

"Oh Will," says Hannibal, mouth slowly curving from his usual amusement to something treacle-thick and warm, something Will can't recognize. "I have only been a constant in my intentions for you."

His throat closes around a protest. "You have a funny way of showing it," Will rasps, and despite trying to claw it back on like a cloak, the coolness of his facade melts away, and all that remains is watering in his eyes. All he wants is to melt into someone hidden once again,

an unrecognizable face in an unknown land, that doesn't want to be reassured, that doesn't want to smash Hannibal's elegant fingers until they can stop prying at his shelters like he's prying open shells for pearls.

(*Those thoughts are yours. Why must he always take them and put them under glass, where they don't hold up under scrutiny and become dark and ugly? Why can't you have this one small thing, to be an average man that nobody cares about, and nobody wants to make a showcase of, or put in a cage?*)

He can't stand how his own fingers tremble at the stem of the snifter in his momentary wrath, and can't stand it more that he knows it's seen not as a weakness, but something like a pinky promise. The moment in Baltimore, where Will weighs a handgun in his grasp, merely delayed, not left behind.

(*You've run halfway across a continent to avoid this man. What will you do with that failure? Do you want to do anything at all?*)

When the drinks run down, and Will can swallow around his own resentment, it feels unproductive to stay here. The incident at the dive bar is easily forgotten in a place that is known to have incidents, but this is a nice spot that he likes to spend time at, and he's not entirely convinced he can continue to talk to Hannibal without either stabbing him with a broken Glencairn glass, or start crying. Both are a mortifying prospect.

(*You know what you **could** do.*)

It feels foolish to bring Hannibal back to the house.

He does it anyway.

There's no way Hannibal hasn't sussed out where the house is anyway. This is a man known for waiting months and months between kills, between even making the barest contact with people before sculpting them into something more pleasing. Will has a rare moment to set the pace of the evening, on his own familiar terms. Hannibal follows alongside him on the narrow sidewalks, perfectly content to be guided. It must be nice to live in that kind of self-assuredness.

"Perhaps another neutral location?" asks Hannibal, unusually quiet while Will rallies his mood. He had tried to take the bill for the night, but Will very nearly tears the receipt in half with his haste to grab it and slam his bank card down. (*Don't let* him *make you feel small.*) Rory had looked at him a little warily - Hannibal does the wise thing and doesn't comment at all.

"Like what, a vacant park or maybe an infrequently used alley? Astoria's not exactly a haven for unpopulated buildings, and we certainly aren't bar hopping so that *everyone else* can hear the rest of my sordid origin story," says Will, prickly as he runs a spare hand through his hair and adjusts his glasses. "Better to invite you now than to have you invite yourself in at 3 am when I *really* would be mad about it," he huffs, stuffing his hands into the pocket of his waterproof jacket, hiding his neck in a grey circle scarf that he grabs from the front of the bar. Technically, he's mad about it now, thinking if there's any conceivable way that maybe God can do him a solid and open up a second pit in the basement next to Freddie.

Besides, a poisonous part of him is curious, the part of him that baits Matthew Brown into assassination, talks sanguine and hateful to Abel Gideon between cell walls. Will wants to see if Hannibal has a sense for the violence that occurred all those months ago. He seems delighted to prod Will with poorly veiled innuendo about it, like he's some sort of savant of all things dreadful. (*He is - you are too.*) So why not put that sharp blade of a mind to a test?

At one point he looks back to the man following behind him, arrested by the unflinching look that he receives in turn. It's almost grounding, even as he drags his house keys out, listens to them chime against each other, and greets the dogs that meet him at the front door of the white house. Hannibal has always been a vigilant watchman. Will studiously ignores the basement washroom, climbing the stairs into the open common areas above.

When he flicks on the yellow lights in the kitchen, he looks again at Hannibal. Hannibal, he watches resentfully, greets Winston and Buster with a single methodical scratch of the ears for each. Traitors, the whole lot of them.

There was very minimal contact with any surface in the kitchen at the time of Freddie's death, but it feels stained even with the new cabinets and shiny clean antique tiles. The rest of the attached living room, even with the freshly waxed and polished wood floors, feels dusty and dirtied from his perpetual housework and the unseen shadow of dog footprints that stepped through her blood and the cognac. Even so, Will is more so filled with a childish shame when Hannibal stares at the archaic refrigerator and stove for what feels like an endless amount of time. They're more unattractive than ever before, dyed butter yellow from the previous owner's nicotine habit and quite frankly gross next to all the new white and black pieces of the kitchen.

Hannibal takes in the old cottage kitchen with his usual mystifying smile. "Congratulations Will, it is both very similar to your home in Wolf Trap and a thousand times more...rustic despite your home improvements. How *does* one manage that?"

Will doesn't quite know how to respond to that other than to roll his eyes and frown. Hannibal takes Will's quiet as permission to roam. Will finds he doesn't quite have the nerve to tell him no. He of course gravitates to close to the sink, and Will has to look twice to feel comfortable with the knowledge that the spanner wrench isn't there anymore. Even when it's just him, sometimes it glints from the counter's edge, chromed and solid and heavy. Sometimes he can see Freddie there, turning it in her hand, marveling.

It's nice that he feels calm right now - floating almost. He's a forensic expert, and there's nothing here to extrapolate, though he'll be the first to say that Hannibal, being the first man that could possibly challenge him on it, has an uncanny intuition that Will often thinks is well beyond his own. He suspects Hannibal has an intellectual capacity for empathy that rivals Will's natural born one - how he weaponizes it is the real horror.

Will finds himself wondering what Hannibal would do if the wrench was there after all. *Oh, what is this?* he'd ask, like it wasn't the biggest shiniest thing in the room, barring the chromed kitchen sink faucet that is distracting to Will despite having been the one to pick and install it. *An unusual close distance, don't you think, Will? Never know when it might come in handy. Never know when something craves a solution.*

"You've done quite a bit here," says Hannibal, still taking a turn around the room. Will has difficulty looking away from his shoes, a pair of shiny black brogue boots with incised leather patterns. They click on the porcelain. (*It sounds like hooves - you've taken your pills, you know it's not that.*) "A Victorian house doesn't seem quite your style, though I do

appreciate your attention to detail on the craftworks throughout. But I do wonder if it's less the Victorian and more the disaster that you're after with this."

"Am I only capable of holding down disasters?" asks Will, leaning on the counter before reaching to the cabinet under the sink. Three bottles glint in the dim kitchen lights - he still hasn't replaced them with something stronger, more natural and less yellow. He grabs the cheapest of the three. There's no reason to give something to Hannibal to gloat about; he doesn't need to know how his tastes changed. A jam jar from next to the sink makes a suitable glass, even now. Will's amused to see it's the same one from Freddie's visit.

"Holding down the fort is the term, or whatever you'd call this place. The house of a fisherman for a fisher's son, I think." Hannibal turns to Will, slinging his overcoat over an arm, and in turn laying it over the kitchen bar delicately. So he means to stay for a few - Will grabs for another glass and fills it with two fingers worth. This one has four pointed stars in blue, sitting stark against the brown liquid of the Crown Royal.

Hannibal gives the glass something of an accepting, if reluctant look before taking it in hand. It's strange - Will thought for sure he'd decline. Maybe he'll just hold it to be polite, but sure enough, he takes a drink without a fuss. Distantly, he remembers Beau mentioning Hannibal drinking with him - there's a lot to unpack there. He's not sure he wants to get the suitcases out of that particular car just yet. (*You're still unsure if you don't want an encore of your last visitor's introduction to the house.*) "Astoria is surprisingly historied for the Americas. It's a wonder that it's as small as it is."

Will rolls his shoulders, and takes in the image. Hannibal in his kitchen. Hannibal in his house, with one of his jam jars. Hannibal is still here, and very real. "Far from Portland, far from Seattle, at the mouth of a furious river. Who wants to live next to the gateway to the end of the country, with a sandbar between you and the end of your fortunes?"

"A great many fishermen and fisher's sons it seems," says Hannibal, pacing along the edges of the living room now with his glass in hand, looking through windows, considering again the staircase down to the basement and driveway, as well as the one going up to the bedrooms.

Will tries to broadcast calm, but the pulse in his neck twitches each time Hannibal looks down the lower staircase. He shrugs. "We're all on our way to our next shipwreck either on land or offshore, so I suppose going where the odds are fairly high is a good bet."

“Do you consider yourself a shipwreck, Will?”

“At least the bones of one,” he says, thinking of the old ship hull, run aground in Fort Stevens State Park. “I think my ship wrecked a long time ago. The lookout I had decided to look another way for a bit.”

And goodness, did he look another way. It’s funny, when he really thinks about it. Handed off with white gloves like something fragile to a psychiatrist that has no actual interest in his psychiatric health, only in the fascination of watching it unravel. Will, slowly diluting in the sea of other people’s minds until they are all the same saltwater. He can still feel the rhythmic tick of the metronome, and the unrelenting flashes of light, and Hannibal, kneeling in front of him, always giving *just* enough antibiotics and sedative-hypnotics to keep him going a little bit longer. (*And you, so desperate for the promise of kinship, that you’re willing to return over and over again to the same snake that bit you, admiring its coils, it’s flawless camouflage. How lovely, you think.*)

It’s abrupt, but strikes like steel - he’s bitter. Righteously so, but what makes right now any different from the night he stalks up to Hannibal’s house? Is it that he’s just a pretend person who doesn’t get to feel this way anymore? Someone Hannibal doesn’t recognize? Will supposes it would be some sort of justice for him to be destroyed by a stranger.

All this vengeance he wanted to pour out six months ago, distilled and wasted while he rebuilds somewhere else. He’s too tired to start again. To do the pouring, or to do the rebuilding. Will hasn’t known how to feel through the entire surreal evening, but the night is painted more disappointing than mere minutes ago.

Will stares at him for a moment, the dark silhouette of the suit and shoulders and cutting face against the windows looking down the hill and to the bridge beyond.

Hannibal, with all that uncanny intuition, seems to pick up on his dark mood, turning to face him. His aristocratic bearing, ever carved smooth and furrowed with calculation, softens. Will wonders what he must see. “Controlled descent into terrain is always dangerous - the vessel is falling apart, ripping at the seams of the atmosphere until the point of contact with the ground. The pilot and onlookers often have no recourse - the options are the ground by choice, or it is death and then the ground shortly after.”

Will turns towards the kitchen, unable to stomach the soft look and the sensation of disintegration from atmospheric re-entry. There would be rocks, the crunching underbrush of dead leaves and pine needles, and he, sliding along, a flaming wreck. “So what,” he starts, “you want to argue that I was on a crash course regardless of psychiatric assistance, and only with your swift decision making did I survive?” and this comes with a wide arching arm, fingers loose while the other hand nurses his drink. “Great advocating for your profession, glad that we were able to waste some valuable time pretending it was going to end any other way than it was. It *does* probably help when the co-pilot isn’t knocking hoses off their spigots and flipping switches to see how they light up.”

Hannibal frowns, considering him with a tilted head again.

“It must be tiring being unable to accept your nature over the clumsy costume you wear,” he says after an over-long pause, with the aesthete drawl that Will sometimes hears like it’s inside him. “You’re positively teeming with the trappings of the moral nouveau riche, broadcasting your goodness and martyrdom. Does it make you feel better to know that I orchestrated the trip to Baltimore State for you to consider where your hero’s journey had gone, and that it wasn’t merely a premature visit that you would have found your way to with or without me?”

Will doesn’t want to hear it, and winces. “I didn’t want to hurt people. You made me think I hurt a lot of people.”

“Let’s be fair, dear Will. You didn’t want to hurt *those* people,” Hannibal digs, sibilant and flaying. He’s just a shadow in the living room now, something Will can write off with creeping uneasiness. Something children slam the door ahead of to hide in bed from. “You’ve wanted to hurt people off and on your entire solitary life, and moving to the mouth of a river to live in the foam along the shores isn’t going to change that. It’s why you move so far from your roots, every time those roots start to grow.”

“I’m not like that.”

(*You **are** like that.*)

Hannibal paces until he returns to the kitchen, contemplating, running his fingers along the new countertops, flicking the edge of a drawer knob to listen to the dull thud of steel. Will feels him measuring his steps, the entryways, the little patio deck overlooking the river and the view of the Astoria-Megler Bridge. Drawing conclusions, with tracing hands.

"How long did it take Freddie to get here?" asks Hannibal, very intent to meet eyes again. "How much had she guessed before she was brave enough to intrude on you?"

He breathes thinly. "Not very long at all." So much for denying everything - still no substance to prove anything.

Not without substance to Hannibal. He smiles, a real one, but it's heavy, syrup-laden and slow like a drizzled reduction. Will can almost smell the sugar burning. "Our intrepid reporter was confident she had caught you pretending at being a fish amongst fish. Drinking with co-workers, laughing at trite customers, complaining about employers and money...small things, making small lives. We all know you're bigger than that."

Will huffs a small laugh, looking down at his now empty jam jar glass. "I'm really not. What are you going to do when you find out someday that I'm no bigger than engine parts, and disaster houses, and dogs with bad drinks?"

Hannibal is behind him suddenly, searingly. He's close enough for Will to feel his breath on the shell of his ear, the radiating heat of him almost touching his back. "But you *are* . Bigger and above the trawlers and little ships of a port town. Bigger than playing bloodhound for the serial killer of the week. Certainly bigger than Freddie Lounds, who I feel passed into this house, but not out. Your home is charming, but with the quiet waiting patience of a tomb." He moves silently around Will's side, trying to catch his gaze again. "I'm not a great fan of coincidence. Rather I am in all things an advocate for cause and effect. How new are the cabinets, Will?"

Frustration starts building again, both from the needling and the need to avoid being needled. Will scoffs. "What is it with you and trying to get me to confess to murder? It's been all of a few hours and you're already working on it again."

Hannibal moves to stand in front of him. "One should live in observance. I simply look for patterns to repeat in things I've observed."

Will turns away, slamming his little glass down and grabbing for the lid of his whiskey again to pour. “Fucking right - observed, sure, like animals in the zoo are observed in nature? Should I worry about more ears and getting an impromptu endoscopy again? Maybe this time you’ve tried to set up a kidney in good fun. I guess I should count my lucky stars that this time at least it’s not someone I’m feeling *paternal* towards.”

Hannibal shrugs behind him, a huff of warm air by his ear the only indication of his amusement, but still maintains his unflinching eye contact. “It was so easy for you to leap to the worst for Abigail, Will, that it really merits your attention that you’ve thought ‘Ah yes, of course I would consume her.’ Crawling around in other people’s thoughts, but also your own to the point that violence is the only practical answer in the face of hard decisions. Violence is always your first answer, even if it isn’t your first response, isn’t it Will?”

Will pushes him away, throwing his arms up in the first deliberate contact of the evening, but he feels breathless like they’ve been fighting the whole time. “You really don’t know how to stick your hands into wounds, do you? A surgeon constantly looking for seams to rip.” It’s surprising how refreshing it is to see Hannibal forced to take a step back.

“Life is simple for me here, it’s easy,” Will continues. “I can look at people, and when it gets to be too much, I can look out on the river or the sea. No one is hurting, no one is asking me to look for the worst case scenario. Someone’s nightmare wrapped up in crime scene tape and a tidy report on the desk of a government bureaucrat. I can take my dogs and go out to the peninsula and be small and unimportant again, and I don’t have to worry about sad, blue eyed girls, or grandiose biblical punishments dealt out by self-important megalomaniacs with a history in the medical field.”

“Such things you say to me,” Hannibal teases, while leaning on the opposite counter, eyes a little wild with what Will thinks he reads as anger, but with a hungry glint. He turns his gaze temporarily to his jam glass, examining it, or perhaps obfusticating what he’s actually thinking about. Will wouldn’t put it past him to be waxing poetic about a chip in the bottom of it. (*If anything he’d like it better - Hannibal likes beautiful broken things, your present company no exception* .) “I have every reason to be self-important,” he adds, glancing back upwards. For a moment, Will is stuck in the crosshairs. “There are so few in the world that are my equal, much less understand me.”

“Equal capacity, not equal value,” Will finds himself biting out.

Hannibal shakes his head but shrugs, smile lifting again at the corners. Arrogant bastard. “Imagine how singular you are, what kind of an opportunity that you pose. You’ll have to forgive my occasional Isaac on the mountain - some gods demand sacrifice.”

“I don’t know why you’d think you get to be the one to decide.”

(*Or why it has to be you.* Does *it have to be you?*)

Hannibal puts the glass to his mouth again, draining it. Biting at the corner of his mouth, even now, as Will remembers. “For the same reasons you decided on our friend Freddie, I’d imagine,” he says, putting the glass to the side, next to the sink. “Rapidly, like a wind across the ridge of a mountain’s saddle. Absolute, piercing.”

Will throws his own drink back, only a quarter of the way drained, but finished all the same. The burn of it recalibrates him, moves him away from the sensation of churning concrete, scrubbing tile. “You can repeat that all that you want to. You still don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says with a frown.

Will nearly flinches when Hannibal leans away from the counter and over Will’s shoulder, pulling his overcoat back out from across the kitchen island and dropping his polite smile, the one he uses as a placeholder for earnest reaction. He shrugs it over his arms, flattening the lapels studiously. Will’s distracted by the dark green lining, shining in the kitchen’s incandescent lights, disappearing behind the fabric of Hannibal’s suit.

“But I do,” Hannibal says with a wink, backing away towards the flight of downward stairs, where the front access door beneath the patio awaits, and the basement washroom to its left. “However I’m coming to think we’ve given each other quite enough to think about tonight, and you’re tired. Running into old friends does that sometimes. Thank you for the company - it was very diverting, for the first time in months.”

Will is confused for a moment, before he understands - is he really leaving? After all that? Not a knife thrown, not an ego more than bruised instead of broken. He distrusts it. "Is that it?" he says with a frown.

He's given another mystifying look. Will thinks it's bullshit - he's tired of being treated like he can't understand things, or that he's just being deliberately obtuse.

“Reflect on your homework, Will,” says Hannibal. “I know I will.”

Down one stair, down another, receding into the night. Will follows unwittingly paces behind, even as Hannibal slips from the front door into the gloom of the night. It’s like a ghost visited, and left a glass of not-quite finished drink behind.

(*You miss him already. You missed an opportunity to change that, to keep him buried nearby. Alive or dead, it’s all the same - you feel different with him than anyone else.*)

Will tries to sleep - it’s not really working out for him though.

He’s poured himself one too many tonight after Hannibal disappears into the muted street lights, watching the clock work its way into the small hours and the marine layer grow thicker until only the suggestion of lamps can be seen on the bridge. He must be coming back - Will can’t picture him being content with their conversation. Hannibal’s crossed a near literal 3,000 miles to tell him he was on a goddamn beer blog for half a second once in April or May.

(*Take comfort - it surely irritates him more that it took this long to say even that much. Good job, you tell yourself. Wow, great work, you say from the creaking base of the air mattress, staring into the whiteness of the ceiling* .)

The bedroom door stands open, with the glow of the hallways lights soft but vividly filled with shadows. Every scratch of a tree branch on the eaves of the house is the scraping of horns. Every car passing is the police to come and lock him up a second time. He wouldn’t put it past Hannibal to have decided he didn’t spend enough time in the mental hospital the first time around and maybe he should have another go at it.

(*“One should be of the right frame of mind going into therapy, if they hope to show any sort of progress,” says Hannibal, legs crossed, fingers crossed.*)

Honestly, the prospect that Hannibal is sleeping peacefully somewhere down the street is laughable, but maybe that’s just how it’s been from day one. Will, twitching his way through most interactions, trying not to misstep, to say too much, to say too little, bestowing every conversation with importance, all the while Hannibal Lecter speaks with the casualness of a Sunday lunch.

Will wants to kill him.

He pulls Winston to his chest, Buster laying between his legs, snout perched on an ankle. Eventually, the small rises and falls of their breath lulls him into a fitful rest.

He dreams of slaughtering sheep on the mountainsides, and the feeling that God blesses him for every swing of the cleaver.

Will eventually throws up at 5 am.

Nestled there, a yellow tablet, partially dissolved.

He takes more of the clozapine with a glass of water and starts his coffee maker in the kitchen. He’ll need a clear head for the days coming, and what better fuck you to broadcast to a negligent psychiatrist than diligent mental healthcare?

After a fortifying two hours spent chugging water like he’s run a marathon, a morning trip to Pig’n Pancake is in order.

The diner near the highway and the shore line is an easy walk for Will on most days, especially to grab bacon for the dogs and a quick cup of coffee before heading to the docks to grab the boat and head to work. Today being Saturday, there's entirely too many people in the restaurant. A killer headache casts an unsavory sheen on his egg breakfast, and a mother arguing with her two young children two booths over is almost loud enough to trigger a migraine.

He wonders what Hannibal is eating. Will figures it's something ridiculous and complicated for a Saturday morning with no plans, assuming he has access to a kitchen. While Astoria has a fair number of good places to eat, Will would hardly start dealing out Michelin stars, and honestly he doesn't know if he's ever even seen an instance of Hannibal eating at a standard restaurant. Even now, with half an empty booth across from him, Will can't cut and paste the man into the setting.

Maybe a text message is appropriate. What is the acceptable mode of contact when you've ghosted someone for months and months, and had a long, drawn-out conversation only for him to walk off casually in the small hours of the morning? Is it bad form to text? Should he give even half a damn seeing how his last attempt at contact went unanswered?

Let me guess, he begins, ***you're eating something with a name with more vowels than ingredients.***

It takes a while for a response, but eventually he feels the phone vibrate on the table top while he eyes his egg breakfast with a mournful turn of his stomach.

I assume this is Will. Good morning, I hope you're feeling in better spirits. The ones from last night seem to have left you in a mood.

Very shortly after - ***How long have you had this number?***

Will ponders that. He's had a lot of time to consider if Hannibal hadn't answered him when he called from the hospital because Beau had distracted him, or because he was ignoring him. Occam's razor suggests that he simply didn't recognize the number - for all that Hannibal fixates on Will, he supposes it's fair that in a world with thousands and thousands of phone

numbers and leaving no messages, he's just another missed call from unknown masses. It's humbling - an oversight from Hannibal, something Will often forgets him to be capable of.

(*Is it better to know he's not impervious to error? Or is it more frustrating to know the margin of error he operates with always had the possibility of leaving you irrevocably damaged, and him too arrogant to calculate for it?*)

At least since May, he replies. ***Longer really.***

His stomach continues to curdle, and he stabs at the yolks of the eggs. He looks again at his phone, and continues.

You generally have that effect on me, by the way. Putting me in a mood. If anything we should be sending commendations and grants to the nation of Scotland for producing the elixir that walked us through no less than two hours of conversation with no known seizures, one-sided druggings, psychic driving to murder teenagers, or third-party execution requests. Three-fourths of that is usually caused by you, by the way.

Am I really so prolific? comes the reply. ***You flatter me, and your third-party executions were an admirable effort, if a bit misguided. Come by for breakfast, or an early lunch. My address is as follows.***

And just like that, Will knows where Hannibal is, and it really is as simple as him sleeping nearby, while he fretted his night away. It's constantly frustrating to realize how well Hannibal lives with and in spite of Will constantly crumbling at his side. It doesn't seem to matter how far apart they are - Hannibal is perpetually as placid as the surface of a lake. He wants to kick up some ripples - he wants to make him sorry.

Will can't look away from the rental apartment's living room - it is finely furnished, stylish, and very adventurous for someone in their 20s or 30s, replete with motivational imagery, thrifted artwork, and the occasional taxidermied piece. Despite living on the west coast for

the greater part of the year, Will is uncertain if he's ever going to acclimate entirely to all the hipster bullshit that invades the entire tourism industry.

It's unsurprising that Hannibal has found a place as close to Will as he has - it is surprising that this is what he's picked.

"I could live without all of the trite word art, but I'm choosing to look at it as a zen koan and reflect on it. Live in the moment as it were." Hannibal stands next to Will, looking at the overall ensemble with the look of one who needs to go to the grocery store an hour before dinner because they ran out of eggs. It is perhaps the most recognizably normal look Will has seen from Hannibal in their entire acquaintance, barring the relief the man had broadcast following Tobias Budge's death and the echoing answer of it in Will.

Will shrugs. "A giant pillow that says "SAND" on it feels a bit below your pay grade."

"Alas, I am neither a minimalist or a literalist that can take this...either housewife or DuChampian approach to decor, but fortunately the kitchen is acceptable, and you are within walking distance. I hear walkability is all the rage in real estate these days."

Will smiles despite his desire to stay cold and ineffable. "Central urban location would take the wind out of most serial killers' sails, but you seem to have plenty of experience in that department."

"I aim to exceed expectations."

"Nothing but a 5-star review for Hannibal Lecter, MD, licensed psychiatrist and probably some sort of gastronomical title amongst the numerous others."

Hannibal turns to lean against the back of a wingback chair, upholstered in the most obnoxiously skin-colored pink velvet, with a tasseled black and white ikat pillow and all. It's so incongruous to what Will knows of Hannibal's own taste that it's borderline comical looking at him in an oxblood-colored shirt with black vest and pants, a devil trapped in an issue of Kinfolk magazine.

“Yet another thing I haven’t pursued academically, but I’m young still,” he says with his usual Cheshire smile. “Do you think I could pull off a full-service restaurant with my standard farm to table approach? I could probably be quite successful with the tech industry doing what it does to the west coast.”

“Gentrification or man eating?” says Will, turning to the loft windows that overlook the Columbia River and piers.

“Is there a difference?”

Will laughs in surprise, again reluctantly taken in by the setting. He glances out from the window at a gull wheeling through the air, fishing for topsmelt, while Hannibal opens a bottle of Pinot Noir. When he hands Will a glass with an amused glance, and they both turn to observe a clear day over the bridge. Freight ships and small boats move along the water, while cormorants and other birds mew on the shore. People walk the pier - they live normal lives.

Hannibal is standing too close for Will, but he allows it. He doesn’t know why he allows it, and it sours the wine for him. His heart is racing. He looks for a distraction.

“Drinking before noon seems a little sad.”

(*At least where people can see you do it. Easier on the boat when no one can really see what you’re doing, and only the dogs pacing from starboard to port side.*)

“It’s Saturday - medically speaking, you should do all of your drinking several hours before sleep. Better for the mind, less risk of poor sleep and Alzheimer’s, if you really want to get into it. I personally think the sun is out and shining and we should enjoy the day.”

Will snorts, looking from the water down to the parking lot at a tidy row of cars. Trucks, beat up sedans, and shining in glossy black enamel among them, something very expensive but sporting indeed. “Is that stupid lunchbox that calls itself a Range Rover your rental?”

“When in Rome, as they say.” Hannibal seems to take no offense. Will is starting to get discouraged by how determined Hannibal is to not allow a single ember of his insults to catch fire so far.

“I don’t know if you’re in Rome,” says Will. "Probably want to lower your expectations from that. A truck probably would have been lower key, but I guess with all that IPO money coming from Seattle and San Francisco, you’re probably safe in typical tourist territory.”

Hannibal salutes with his wine glass. “Then I shall consider myself forewarned about the local residents and their feelings on my petrol-eating monstrosity of a vehicle. It is quite comfortable though - heated seats, surround sound, and such. I have gotten to know it quite well in recent days.”

“So what, you drive out to Astoria in your hype machine monster of a car with surround sound to check in on your long-lost favorite pet project? Only the rarified for you, no matter the practicality?” asks Will, feeling the creeping resentment again, safe to come out when the absurdity of the loft’s decor becomes secondary to the company it keeps. “I suppose you did describe me as a chair made of antlers.”

Hannibal favors him with a side glance, looking unbothered. “I described your empathy as such - I think the entirety of you is more complex than that would be alone, or else you certainly wouldn’t still be alive,” he says lightly. He’s more poisonous the softer he is. Will knows it to be a warning now, as gentle as a rattle in high grass.

Will pushes forward anyway, satisfied to have found a sore point for the moment. “Your interest in me has more in common with wanting to try a South African wine with pinotage than it does with me as an actual person with agency. A regional varietal, with distinct features that can be put on a shelf for several years with minimal ill effects. That’s what the trip to prison is for, right? Shelving a vintage for a better meal?”

Hannibal takes a sip of his pinot, formulating a reply. So Will knows he’s gotten at least part of it right - Hannibal is having to rewrite his script.

“They interest me in similar ways,” he says after a moment’s pause, licking his bottom lip, crooked tooth caught over its edge. “You as a person and you as a mirror are arresting. I look in either scenario and see both the individual and the transference of myself. I am not above finding that attractive.”

“A mirror can’t re-engage you. You just engage yourself at that point, and I’m just an object used as a tool in that outcome. Not very attractive to me,” says Will. “Or is that something you actually want? You don’t really have to bother with feelings and managing expectations for someone when they’re just a reflection of you. Mutualism can lay dead on the ground, and on you go, looking.”

Hannibal turns his head, face relaxed, eyes darting from feature to feature of Will’s face. He feels observed, a painting in a gallery. Will is shocked when he feels Hannibal reach out to him after contemplating for a long time, just two fingers through the hair just above his ear, tugging a lock of hair and smoothing it into the rest. He imagines it curling in the humidity away from the touch, held apart from the rest of his head like it has been gilt. Singular. Seen.

A vein in his neck feels thunderous under the barely-there pressure of fingertips before they recede rapidly.

“Mutualism is a particular joy and pain when it comes to you,” says Hannibal, as calm as ever, with the offending hand behind his back, the other casually twisting the stem of the glassware. “The ecstacy of a long-desired synchronous thought with you is constantly at risk. Who knows at what moment you will return to critical self-awareness, and contrariness for the sake of feeling like an individual again.”

“You think I’m contrary for the sake of being contrary.”

(*Are you not?*)

Hannibal smiles fully at him, and takes another drink. “I think you’re afraid to accept you can be aligned in thought earnestly, not through the filter of your empathy. You avoid personal attachment out of fear that you’re aping someone’s emotions, and unable to accept the possibility that you are in agreement rather than mirroring.”

“I can’t always tell the difference.” Will hates the admission. It’s still true. It’s true even now, dodging verbal parries in ways he doesn’t with other people. He draws his emotions close to himself, but feels a snarling need to protect them. Is that him, or is that Hannibal? (*Surely the emotions are you - he is without crack or crevasse, an unmarred ice sheet rolling over the earth, grinding it to dust. You, an explorer, foolishly enter a cave beneath.*)

“So you strike out to ensure a difference every time.”

“It feels safe.”

“Do you think that’s the most important thing? Being safe?” asks Hannibal, light again in tone and on his feet, walking to the other side of Will. Will contemplates if he will touch his hair again to match the opposite side, equally yoked with the burden of his undivided attention. (*Why does it sear like it does?*) “No one is actually safe for us. The very existence of independent thought ensures it. I could be planning to break your neck even now, and you couldn’t know it until the deed was in action and likely done.”

“I used to think you were a safe place for me, and now I’m not so sure you didn’t actually want a mirror where you can’t normally find one,” says Will, eyes narrowed and brows tight. He tries to focus on the outside, where another gull joins the first in harassing the fish, and he doesn’t have to look Hannibal in the face. “My empathy is convenient for you - you don’t have to worry about my authenticity, because I am authentic for everyone. It’s why it hurts. It’s why I don’t like to look. I don’t like to think if I was a vanity project, or if someone actually is concerned for my well-being.”

“Your authenticity is astonishingly beautiful. I wish you knew it too.”

Will looks at Hannibal harshly, a small dry laugh rushing out.

(*Astonishingly inconvenient. Astonishingly abrasive. Astonishingly painful to sheathe inside yourself. Astonishingly attractive to only the sick and destructive that look at you and see opportunity, not a soft young man working a hard neighborhood, or a grizzling middle aged scholar who is learning to know better, or this tired bruise-eyed mechanic who is unable to find still waters to rest on.*)

Will is overwhelmed. He wants to go home. He wants to close the front door, gather Buster and Winston, and lay on the air mattress to stare at the whiteness of the ceiling and go back to the simple quietude of the summer. He swallows the entire glass of wine, feeling it upset his already poor breakfast.

He walked here. He's good to go whenever. Maybe he'll get some french fries to sober up. Maybe he'll set the building on fire and not have to think about this anymore. Word art, velvet chair, oxblood wearing devil alike up in flames. Sounds like a great weekend.

(*You ran from it but you also want this. You enjoy and dread the clarity of purpose when he challenges you. You missed the opportunity to make the best of a bad thing, and here he is, a stone waiting to be shaped instead of only shaping you* .)

"I'm getting french fries and ice cream right now," says Will, refusing to make eye contact, and refusing to talk any further about this thing inside him that Hannibal thinks is beautiful, and he thinks is a ghost's den, full of orphaned murderers and irrepressible desire to be the same as others, no matter how broken. "Had a shitty night - can't imagine why. You can come if you want, but that's what I'm doing."

(*You might destroy him. You might not.*)

Hannibal smiles. Drains his glass like Will, but flexes his tongue against his bottom lip, breathes through his mouth. He's tasting the wine, the most in a rush Will has seen him be when engaged in food. "Then avoidance continues to be the theme of our reunion," he says with a flourish, setting the burgundy glass down. "So be it. I suppose even a small town like this must be able to make pomme frites without totally butchering it."

"When in Rome," says Will with his own salute of the wine glass.

act 3 - i only believe in intoxication, in ecstacy

Someone has to say the wrong thing at some point. Turns out the first time is very shortly after their second meeting at the loft, in the aftermath of buying fried foods and ice cream. Very American of them. It sounds about right, all things considered.

Will is satisfied with Hannibal's polite handling of his french fry demand, even if he had secret hopes of escaping. He isn't entirely sure he understands what Hannibal wants by the end of Saturday afternoon other than his company. It's a novel experience for him - he's not popular or charismatic, and not by design. Always the new boy at school means always the least fluid, even with all those mirror neurons desperately firing off to make a normal human boy somehow.

He's made jokes about Hannibal wanting to be his friend, and Hannibal has made jokes about trying to be his friend, but everything that their acquaintance is built on is unfriendly. It's a miracle (*a mislabeled disaster*) that they get along like a match and gasoline. They just burn past all the history over verbal parries and challenges.

Hannibal makes a face when he sees that yes, the place Will is going that Saturday afternoon is truly an ice cream and french fry place, but he is thankfully very pleasant with the owners, and compliments their gelato-like ice cream and unusual flavor options. Will gets the impression that Hannibal is being indulgent of him. It's not his kind of scene. Sitting on a painted red bench and looking out over the piers, Hannibal isn't quite out of place with all the other out-of-towners roaming around, but definitely irregular, some kind of unseasonal bird pushed into the wrong territory with a sharp black blazer.

"I am thinking roasted duck with leeks and turnips tonight," says Hannibal, like it's not mid-afternoon, and that it won't take a million years to cook that last minute. To Hannibal, who probably has an amusing anecdote about supper hours in Spain, that's probably not a problem. "There's a very nice Viking range in the flat that will accommodate it, and I'd like to put it through its paces. Would you care to join me?"

The " **no** " is out of Will's mouth before he can stop himself. He thinks of jars and jars of frozen meals, thrown aside in Wolf Trap. Dozens of meals eaten in Baltimore, fantastically flavored to hide fantastical elements within. "I'm not a fan of your typical ingredients," he says, murmuring low and hateful.

“You must think very highly of me indeed if you’re under the impression that I’ve had that kind of time, and while the stove will accommodate a grown duck, I have doubts about larger game birds, as it were. It’s been all of 48 hours since I arrived, and everyone except you has been exceedingly pleasant.”

Will smiles wryly. “Then is the invitation for me specifically a matter of entertainment, or prudence to make sure you have all the necessary items in line?”

“Haven’t settled on the right use for you yet,” Hannibal says cheekily, looking very devilish in his red shirt, a cashmere scarf, and black outerwear. “Dinner is entirely a matter of habit and availability tonight. Think of it as being like any other.”

“Like any other, huh? I’ve underestimated your dedication to haute cuisine a few too many times,” says Will, and pushes the sudden gut-wrenching image of Beverly, asking him to look at photos from between the prison bars. (*“It’s a color palette,” you say. “One of these things is not like the other, one of these things just doesn’t belong,” you say. “Stay away from Hannibal Lecter,” you say, and here you are, not taking your own advice.*)

He spoons up a bite of thick honeyed gelato, clenching his teeth on the plastic spoon until he feels it splinter and squeak. Hannibal watches his face very closely after. “The concept that you came back to your Instagram flat for the night and went to bed like a reasonable person instead of looking for an opportunity is almost more unrealistic,” he tries to continue, more cavalier than he feels.

Hannibal, with a very petite serving of a black marionberry sorbet that he holds more like an accessory than as food, considers. “As a rule I don’t sleep much, but even by my standards it was a poor show of effort last night.”

“Bad dreams?” jokes Will. “I have a few to share, so if you’d like a few as souvenirs of your visit, I’ve got plenty to pass around.”

“Don’t you want to keep them on your mantle? Seems a shame to break a set apart.”

“Oh goodness, you gave them to me, it’s only right to offer them back to you first,” says Will, voice growing snide, taking another overly large bite of the ice cream.

(*Does someone like Hannibal give nightmares out on loan? Does he make them, or does he lend out some of his own horror? You’ve thought from time to time some truly exceptional times must have made the man that slices ears like a shiitake mushroom while discussing foreign preparation methods* .)

With a sinking feeling that pools in his gut, he throws the rest of his food out in the closest trash can.

“Would you look at that, I’ve lost my appetite,” Will says. Hannibal, a smarter man than he is clearly, understands when the curtain draws for now, and nonchalantly takes a bite of his own black and cold sorbet.

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2 am is its usual pit of darkness - little lanterns up the stairs, glowing quietly in the late hours of the night. The house is old and it creaks, and Will has long since taught himself to ignore noises as it settles. Between the occasional flare-ups from himself, and the antique pipes that grind against the coming colder weather, he prefers to write everything off as coincidence, and jokes to himself it’s nothing that another ill-placed tool can’t solve.

He wakes with his heart pounding in his chest, afraid to move. It feels like being watched, but with both dogs unmoving at his sides under the blankets, he tries to simply sit still, and breathe in long, deep pulls of air.

(*The usual bad dream - don’t let it keep you awake.*)

If something flickers from the corner, he doesn’t let himself stare at it long enough to find out. He only wakes in the morning with the certainty that something had been wrong, and no matter what he looks at, he’s not sure what’s out of place.

The clouds are rolling in from the north, and as the sun begins to work its way westward on Sunday evening, Will finds himself nursing a beer on the front balcony, sitting in his spindle chair that he's pulled from the living room to the narrow walkway outside. Winston takes the space on the planks closest to him, content to watch from between the slats of railing, and Buster curled up into a small knot in Will's lap.

Hannibal had been respectful of Will's lack of contact throughout the day, perhaps still puzzling over their conversation the day prior, and Will's rapid turn from pleasant to unhappy - after his poor night of sleep, Will finds himself drifting between naps and doing some puzzling himself.

Thinking of the shadows, he locks the doors before he heads out to his perch. When one wishes to be left alone, it's just good sense. Besides, it's time to fall back on a favorite pastime - drinking alone, which can't be done with company, even less so the kind to send holier than thou emails about it while no doubt drinking chablis.

He turns the bottle of cognac on the floor, slouching deep into his chair, feeling the bottle grind gently against the wood of the porch. It's nice to come to a halt, like slipping onto a sandbar away from the waves.

Will knows the past 48 hours have trashed him. He's tired of Hannibal's charmed luck, deliberate casualness, and perpetual need to look inside locked things, despite his only being here for a couple days at best. Will supposes he's earned it for the moment - Hannibal's won this phase of the war. He can't seem to get a word in edgewise that really sticks the way that he wants it too. Always the dancing responses, always the smiling face. He knew it would be like this.

But really, what did he expect, an apology? Oh, sorry Will, that whole frying your brain escapade was just for fun, but I see you're mad about it now. Let bygones be bygones? It's hilarious to even think about.

"Rapunzel, let down your hair?"

Will blinks. Looks down from the raised porch to the lawn below, takes a long sip of his drink. Hannibal appears from beside the house, near the entry door with all that deliberate casualness Will's been resenting.

Will's laugh is sharp. “It’s not that long. Did you really go try the locked door before actually trying to talk to me first? I’m not exactly in an unsubtle location at the moment, and a simple ‘may I’ would have been appreciated.”

Hannibal smiles. “May I?”

“Fuck no, you should have led with that.”

“Ergo, trying the door first.” Hannibal shrugs.

“Most people take that as a sign that perhaps the shop is not open for business,” says Will, pushing his legs against the balcony railing and balancing on the back spindle legs of the chair. He can still hear his father scolding him for it, teachers telling him it’s ungentlemanly, but the wobbling tilt of it feels nice, less serious than the present company merits. “I’m having myself a sit-in tonight. Too many days out playing and not minding my own business has historically not gone terribly well for me.”

Hannibal looks up at him, hair glossed back, hands in the deep pockets of a black pea coat. It’s nice out, but the forecast says rain, and Hannibal Lecter is never one to be caught unawares. He has the lean look of a dog peeking between the slats of a fence, not yet sure if he should just watch or jump the fence.

He pulls one hand from a pocket, pulling the sleeve of the other arm to sit even with his cuffed shirt beneath. “I think you’d not leave your house at all if there wasn’t something to occasionally prod you from your comfort zone. I hadn’t heard from you since yesterday and thought you might need some prodding. You left unsatisfied, if not hungry.”

“Quite comfortable, thank you. No prodding necessary, hugely unwanted. However we are taking comment cards at the front door for future consideration.” He scratches Winston’s

head, and ruffles Buster's scruff with dirty fingernails. "The dogs man up the hospitality department, so you'll have to ask them the particulars."

Hannibal favors Winston with a polite smirk, and Winston, being a dog, takes it to be as good as gold, wagging his tail slowly on the deck. "And what department do you head up, other than security? Operations, perhaps? Business development? Does business development include career pivots?"

"What do you actually want, Hannibal?" Will asks, exasperated, rotating his jam jar on the railing, legs of the chair slamming back down. He avoids looking down, and lets the chill of the condensation center him. (*You don't have to be kind if you don't have to become him for a moment.*) "While I hear the wealthy can frivolously travel at a moment's notice, and god forbid anyone limit your *joie de vivre* , coming here is hardly a spontaneous visit to see family or catch the ski season. I don't think I understand it. Are you here to play with your food, or are you speaking with an old friend?"

"I think that's oversimplifying a bit - I treat friends and food with the utmost attention." He can't see it, but he can hear the humor in Hannibal's voice.

Will snorts, and shoots half the glass in hand in one burning gulp. "Oh bullshit, you literally let my immune system boil my brain for shits and giggles. I wonder what you'd do to someone you actually liked."

The man below stares for a moment, alien in his stillness, tracing the edges of Will's face for tells. "It seems your mood has shifted quite a bit further south since yesterday," Hannibal says after a moment's contemplation.

"It didn't shift, I just remembered why I'm here to begin with. What I don't know is why *you're* here. Did you get tired of parading around in my shoes, or is everyone else just not as much fun to tear down?"

Hannibal shifts on his feet again. The grass is damp, and childishly, Will hopes it stains the leather of Hannibal's loafers.

Hannibal looks up at the house and back to him, reflecting no doubt. “Wearing your skin was more like wearing a shroud. Having the ability to speak freely again with you in the flesh is far more gratifying, even if I’ve discovered a more guarded, retiring man than the one that cried so prettily to lie his way into having a hand in his fate in prison...I see both of you, the one who wants companionship and the one that wants to bite,” lilts Hannibal. “But as for me, perhaps I like to mix enjoyment with pain, and can accept the occasional bite. Unlike you who struggles to reconcile them to the same room.”

“Seeing as I literally traveled to the opposite side of a large land mass to not have to have this conversation, I *really* have to ask. Do you recognize experiential avoidance when you see it and understand it, and then just ignore it because it’s inconvenient for you?” Will’s jam jar taps against the railing, shaking the joints between his fingers. He squeezes until he feels the pulse of blood in them, grounding himself.

Will watches Hannibal turn his head up and to the left, looking to where the neighbor’s second floor lights have come on, before flicking back towards Will on his perch. Will sighs sharply through his nose. “See, I can play doctor too - I know all the tricks. I think you were the one that first posited that I have post-traumatic stress disorder, which is kind of hilarious since most of it came after the suggestion. Feeling inspired after the fact, maybe?”

Hannibal, in a rare show of frustration, opens his mouth to speak not once, but twice before proceeding. Rewriting again. It’s a small satisfaction.

“Surely you know what I’ve wanted for you. Perhaps not since the beginning - I worked very hard to ensure that,” says Hannibal, stiff and unmoving on the grass. The clearest sign of his agitation is the smallest fidgeting of his fingers - Will’s watched him turn pencils, straighten papers, roll his dexterous hands on the tops of desks and tables, always considering a better angle, a finer setup. “But now, yes. There’s very little of the work left to be seen. A draft nearing publication, ready for the press.”

Always these grandiose frameworks. Never a straight answer.

“You wanted me to kill someone and like it without the necessity of the job behind it,” says Will, deliberately bland now, not loudly. (*You have neighbors, for god’s sake.*) “I agreed with you that I enjoyed killing Garrett Jacob Hobbes. But I would have never picked him out of a random crowd. It’s the same way I would have never considered putting down a rabid dog without seeing it was definitely rabid.”

(*You love sad, broken things. You want to repair them until it's obvious it's not possible, and then you must destroy them so that their brokenness can't hurt you too.*)

Will blinks around unexpectedly stinging eyes. There's really no room for misunderstanding or sympathy. "But you took that and an illness that I had *no concept or understanding of* ," he hisses, "as carte blanche to set up an experiment with, most would say, *very* biased parameters. Not very scientific, Doctor Lecter. Not very polite," he breathes.

"Doing something out of necessity is prudence. Doing it out of your own want is joy," says Hannibal, fervent. "The results are consistent regardless. The only thing that changes is your perspective - can you not see that? Striking a man down for sacrilege against the body of others is no different from striking him down for a moral ugliness. He is struck dead in either scenario. Do you not think in the grand scheme of fate that it is the same?" and Hannibal, Will is surprised to understand in a moment of clarity, is as inspired and righteous as a zealot, the feeling like a burning stone under his tongue.

Will finds himself slowly smiling, incredulous, like a hook is stuck in the side of his mouth. It's painful.

"No, I really don't," says Will, and is a little embarrassed to hear the reedy tone of vulnerability somewhere in that. "I'm stained with others' moral uglinesses. The fact that you can't see that is all I really need to know about how you understand me."

He can still feel the steel of the spanner wrench, the gravity of it cracking Freddie's cheek, and the absolute certainty that it needed to happen, the momentum that threw that motion into his pull. (*You have so little to hold onto - you can justify this moment of weakness. You wouldn't have hunted her down. You wouldn't have saved her in a book for convenience, or a rainy day. Smiled as she felt fear. Cause and effect, never caprice.*)

(*The worst part of that is it's true - how self-serving you are, no matter the practicality of it.*)

Will breathes, and looks away. He knows Hannibal is searching his face for something - whatever it is, is beyond him. He's done here today. Without a word, he goes inside without

glancing down. The bottle of cognac left to sit in the evening's growing chill, Will shuts the door to the porch, and turns off the lights. He has to go to work tomorrow, and he's just not in the mood for another loss this weekend. Ascending the stairs to the second floor, he lies on the air mattress unmoving for an hour, expecting retribution.

He doesn't check his phone, he almost doesn't dare breathe.

He walked away - was it always that easy? Did he really not need to hide it in a cloak of late nights and early mornings, and long desperate drives? Will Hannibal really not roll in like a dark cloud, never one to let the last word go? It's the most deliberate decision he's made since spying his bold black tie just a couple days ago. (*Congratulations Will, you've made an adult choice today.*)

There's a dozen books stacked to his right, and a dozen finished to his left, and none of them hold his attention, only the glow of the sun through the windows, and the keen awareness of his hands held impotent on his chest.

He's surprised to hear the clicking of Hannibal's shoes outside heading towards downtown only once the sun is down.

Will, despite his best efforts, can't quite get away from Hannibal, even after Sunday night's walk out.

Monday is a hard day back in the shop, made harder by Hannibal catching Will on the hillside corner near the white house on his walk down to the docks, and again by him directly after work has ended. If Will didn't know any better and have an understanding of how much Hannibal craves entertainment, he might have assumed he just stood there all day, watching the grey day from the boatyard like his own personal widow's watch, more akin to Buster watching from the porch.

But he digresses. To backtrack a bit --

It's a miserable drizzly day. Will knows this the moment he opens his eyes, the sun dimmed, and the sound of water dripping from the spruce needles to the gutters of his house. His neighbor, an older woman with two middle school aged boys, keeps tin rain chimes in the apple trees in her side yard, and they rattle and sing in the first storm of the season. Both dogs are curled tight against him, and Will can't shake the chill from his toes that have hung over the edge of their bed on the floor. When he moves he will hurt - it will be the practical physical hurt of a man growing too old to be sleeping on an air mattress, but there's some comfort in that.

(*It's a self-inflicted pain. It doesn't come from your head, or in little shocks down your arms from the occasional nerve misfire. Normal, not the aftershocks coming almost a year later from your swollen brain. Safe. Yours.*)

He also doesn't particularly want to order an actual bed. His grungy single adult male lifestyle can't be bothered by a trip to Portland to go to IKEA, and there's something to be said about finding a good solid piece of furniture from hunting through ads and estate sales. He'll find time some day, the same way he'll find time to refinish the bathroom.

First, practical steps to get the day going. He stretches and sheds his night shirt and boxers. Second, he suffers a cold shower with his temperamental water heater, while the dogs look on in curiosity as he swears his way through it. Third, he drinks a glass of water and chokes down a granola bar with his medication. (*"Don't take it on an empty stomach," a serious faced young woman in the pharmacy tells you. "You'd hate to be that sick." You want to respond "Young lady, if only I could tell you the ways I already am."*) Fourth, on goes the sweater to cover his navy blue work shirt, embroidered with a simple cursive "Will" in bright yellow stitchery. Fifth is to walk the dogs. Sixth is to lock up. Seventh is to head down the street to grab a cup of coffee.

Well, it should be, but Hannibal is on the sidewalk holding a drink carrier with two travel mugs and a bright yellow umbrella in the other hand. Next to the drab green of his rain jacket and a houndstooth scarf, he could have walked off the set of an indie film. At first he is convinced that it's a hallucination - he's never seen Hannibal wear sportswear before, and he's not convinced he's even capable of it. The vivid umbrella is surreal in the damp, muted weather. Hazardous coloring, like a poison dart frog.

Will shutters his face, resigned - time to put the armor back on.

“How long do you think about your outfits in the morning?,” asks Will, sighing and shrugging droplets from his shoulders. “Do you just see something weeks in advance and immediately think ‘two Mondays from now, if it rains’? Or are you some sort of Morton Salt advocate, and I’m being advertised to subliminally?”

Hannibal gives the umbrella a twirl between his fingers - a few droplets fly off, but the man does a good job of aiming it away from the two of them. “I seldom spend time on things like that, and my umbrella would be blue if this were a sponsorship. Besides, we both know my attempts to sublimate you are chronically disadvantaged.” He smiles. “A good morning to you too.”

Of course Hannibal recognizes a salt brand.

“You know I’m just going to work, right?” asks Will. “This isn’t going to be some kind of leisurely walk in the rain. I’ve apparently got a line of Mercury outboards to fix from people getting them stuck in the seagrass.”

“And what fine work you’ll do on said grass.” Hannibal raises his drink carrier for Will to take a thermos. “Cafe au Lait - I was able to get some admirable coffee beans in Portland before heading out this way.” Will rolls his eyes, but accepts it.

“Trust you to take a trip like this and turn it into a coffee cupping tour,” he sighs, but accepts the coffee. What’s the worst that can happen - Hannibal drugs him again? Hannibal has secretly infused bone marrow into the cream? Will’s done an excellent job of dodging meals that Hannibal makes so far, but he’s got other things to worry about today, it’s really difficult to alter coffee without changing the flavor obviously, and this saves him a trip to the diner.

He resolves to throw the scalding drink at Hannibal if he gets so much as the slightest sense it’s anything other than some barista’s roasting dream that has been slaved over in some converted warehouse near the Willamette River. ***Caution - hot!*** he thinks with a sigh.

Will knows it’s normal when Hannibal doesn’t bother to watch him on the first sip. Nothing to bear witness to - just coffee.

“No samovars in your rental?” he asks after letting a snaking, steaming breath out in the morning air. It is this more than the drink in his hand that Hannibal watches as they begin walking down the sidewalk to the highway and the docks beyond. Some kind of memento mori, no doubt. “How terrible for you.”

“Indeed, I hardly know what to do with myself in the absence of Russian kitchenware. God forbid anyone mistake me for my actual heritage.”

Will risks a glance. “You mentioned being adopted before - what shore of your own did you wash up from before France?”

“Not so very far from the Russian kitchenware. Lithuania before perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet Union if you must know. Every bit as dreadful as you’d guess. I don’t miss it. I much prefer my mother’s heritage as a Milanese Italian if I must choose an identity.”

“Better cuisine?” Will quips. “Definitely sounds like it’s more your speed. Less beets and woolens, more sopranos and haute couture.”

Hannibal gives a toothy grin. “Most definitely.” He takes a long drink of his own coffee, still smiling. The rain is a soft thrumming on the concrete, spotting his leather shoes. Will admires the perfectly round marks they’ll leave. “Has your father ever discussed your ancestry much? You don’t know your mother of course, but cultural identity is a matter of pride to many,” he says when they stop at a crosswalk, glancing to Will.

“Is trailer park trash a heritage?” asks Will. “I’m sure it’s the usual muddy Western European genetics in all the worst possible combinations. Probably not a single viscount or wealthy merchant to my name in recent history. America, the great melting pot as they say. I’ve looked into it casually once or twice in the past, but daddy’s a drifter. He’s hardly hauling lineage notes around.”

“A little more diverse on one side that you think, I’ve learned. Withheld from you, perhaps, but needs drive.”

“Something you get out of my daddy?” says Will, bristling, still pausing to drink the coffee. (*It’s hugely frustrating to you that it tastes good, all those fancy tasting notes roaring to your head that you couldn’t get from the watery ash you sipped in downtown Baltimore.*) He’s not poked this particular wound yet - he doesn’t know how to feel about Hannibal feeling out his past like it’s as simple as a book to take off the shelf, something not loaded with clippings, and scribbled thoughts, and pressed (*poisonous*) flowers between the pages. That Beau indulged Hannibal at all feels like a betrayal all by itself, but Will’s never had the power to scold Beau. But it clicks - Beau’s not one to talk of unshared pasts. Half the flavor is experiencing it for his daddy.

“No, you’re talking about my maternal grandparents,” Will says with a cutting look. “Not withheld - just never wanted. We didn’t talk, so not worth learning *fransé kasé* to impress them, or trying to trace some backwater colonial lord to me. Disappointed that you can’t make fun of a Cajun French pronunciation over your King’s French?”

“Hardly, though that you think I’d make fun of a cultural difference like that is ungracious,” says Hannibal, umbrella rigid above his head where he had been occasionally twirling it like a spinning wheel periodically before. Discomfort, Will reads it as. Imagine that. But the criticism is fair - Hannibal’s never looked down at him like that.

The parking lot entrance to the docks is drawing closer, the occasional noise of cars rushing past on the highway to the bridge and Pacific Coast Highway beyond giving him a moment to regain his bearings. Will doesn’t think he’s ever looked forward to a day of work as much as this one - the distraction is sorely needed. The wheelhouse of Daisy is an ugly off-white beacon in the rainy gloom.

“Why did you need to talk about it with my father?” Will asks, even as he fidgets with the strands of hair he allows to fall over his periphery. No glasses has him feeling particularly naked. “Think you’re going to find some treasure trove of information that sums me up for a tidy research paper? Have an ‘aha’ moment that fits me in a box, the mystery solved forever?” The comforting softer planks of the decking creak under his footfalls. Even Hannibal’s brogues are muted, robbed of their familiarity.

Hannibal must see his fidgeting for what it is, and in a rare show of mercy shifts the subject. “The human experience has a few recurring themes and origin stories - it would be unfairly reductionist to say that they are all the same and fit into the same box.”

“Allowances must be made for yourself, I’m sure,” Will says with a dry laugh, but his attention turns to the boats, and ducking out.

Does he simply walk up to his own boat, confident and certain that he’d just push Hannibal off of it like he did in the kitchen mere nights ago? Does he avoid it and walk to the end of the dock, and try to be a cryptic asshole until the other man gets the hint? No, that’ll probably backfire - Hannibal is a veritable professional at being a cryptic asshole, and likes watching hints disappear in the rearview mirror as he drives by. Will’s certain they include it as a prerequisite for doctorates in Psychiatry, and a flagship personality trait in maladjusted adults who turn to murder as recreational entertainment. He’s seen a few in his career. Hannibal just happens to be the most bourgeoisie one he’s personally encountered.

Better to be direct, then.

(*That’s laughable. You, direct, with anything or anyone that matters?*)

“End of the line,” Will says wryly, moving to undo one of the tie lines holding Daisy to the dockside. “Literally. You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t thank you for starting Monday in a funk - I will however thank you for the coffee.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows raise, even as he accepts his travel thermos back without complaint. He seems a little at a loss for words - maybe he really is that incapable of handling the occasional rudeness. “May fairer winds take you through the day than the ones seeing you out,” he says a little tightly, shaking his umbrella. “When do you expect to be back this way?”

“Same time most folks get off of work, Hannibal. There’s hardly anyone making out of state calls for me to look at boats, thank god.”

He jumps into Daisy, and relishes the way it rocks under his weight. Not solid ground, but solidly his.

“A little trivia, on the topic of heritages,” says Will with a little fall and rise, pulling the boat fenders in and pushing away from the dock. “Something basic, just the typical Google search will do, so I certainly can’t prove any connection to myself.” Hannibal allows it without protest, though his face pinches tight for a flash when Will thinks he realizes that Will really is going to just sail off into the horizon like some Stevensonian pirate. It’s not like he would have actually wanted to sit for 8 hours in a musty shack while Will disassembles engine parts and shares ill-mannered criticisms of the occasionally loathesome customer base. But hey, maybe Hannibal is *that* kind of mean girl after all - it would at least be more relatable than the conspiring, murder, and medical malpractice habits.

He smirks a little too widely, a little too comfortable in having the upper hand for the moment, turning on the engine and yelling over the loud hum, “Clan Graham’s motto is *ne oublie* - forget not.”

The only indicator that Hannibal hears is the knife-sharp smile and amused eyes before he glances away at the bridge nearby, a green steel behemoth that Will passes under every day to go to the shop.

He prays it falls on them, and lets the ocean mist and rain sting at his cheeks as he motors away into the morning gloom. The waves bounce the boat, each one thrumming like a heartbeat.

The shop day is thankfully busy as promised - Frank’s complaining of arthritis again, and repairs don’t magically complete themselves. Scow keeps Will company as he dissembles, oils, and reassembles parts over and over again until he has an empty workbench, and time to smoke on the shop dock.

He enjoys watching the grebes and mallards in the reeds nearby, sheltering from the rain. Even in the worst of weather, the water is their home. Do birds have a sense of time, or just a sense of rightness? When is it best to go out on the water? When is it too late in the day, in the month, in the year to shelter in the river’s edge instead of the Sacramento Delta? Do they think about homes, a place to belong, or do they just belong to each other, and everything else is just the landscape in the background?

The glassy black eyes bring nothing to the forefront of Will's mind. One duck preens, another settles deeper into the shallows of mud, closing its eyes. Rainwater scatters when it hits their brown and tan feathers, vivid slashes of violet and green heads nestling into each other until it's safe and dry and just a matter of waiting. They're living. It's not complicated. It's enviable.

He enjoys their simple needs, and finishes his cigarette with his own thoughts. The drizzly rain and the hum of an empty head is refreshing.

Unfortunately, it doesn't remain that way. Going home brings the same kind of dread Will doesn't think he's experienced since high school, knowing he needs to face another heated exchange with Beau. While Will is well aware that Hannibal isn't nearly as inclined to yelling (*indeed, you don't think you've even so much as heard him raise his voice*), his ways of digging into the meat of a conversation are uncomfortable at best, and flaying at worst. Leaving him on the dock to consider his parting shot was stupid, if for a moment enjoyable. He knows the dogs will be fine because Hannibal isn't unkind to honestly simple animals - he prefers to menace the complex ones that act like they're simple.

(*See? The ducks and the dogs are doing better than you after all.*)

It's both hugely surprising and ominous that when Will pulls around from the sea to the harbor to his dock yard that Hannibal is almost exactly where Will left him, though he appears to have switched into a hooded herringbone pea coat instead of wielding the big yellow umbrella like a warning sign. Something sensible for walking, if a bit high brow for the docks on a Monday. When he gets close enough, he can see Hannibal's face is as inscrutable and sphinx-like as ever.

"So you had a productive day," says Will, throwing his boat fenders out and working his way towards the dock's edge to park. It's almost exactly the morning happening in reverse. "I suppose I should expect my house to be an absolute minefield of forensic evidence?" he adds when he jumps over the edge to land with a hard clunk of boots, and ties the boat on each side to stabilize it.

"No more than you've left in it yourself," Hannibal says with good humor. "I've hardly had enough time to acquaint myself with the locals for that sort of *boucherie* ."

Will rolls his eyes. “It wouldn’t take long,” he says. “Which is not a challenge as much as a warning, by the way. Especially if you’re going around dropping French nouns like you’re back from your first ever euro trip.”

Hannibal smiles, a proper one with teeth. Will has always been a little intrigued by his teeth, the one feature of his that isn’t veneer-smooth. It’s appropriate that it be this one thing, but it’s also disarming how normal it is. Hannibal Lecter, dressed to the nines, with perfect diction, with excellent tastes, and with not quite modern era eastern European dental care. It’s clearly a choice at this point.

“I daresay the locals are no worse here than they are in any other small town from here to the Kuril peninsula, though I admittedly took a drive down to Cannon Beach today.”

Pocketing his keys, Will finds himself snorting and avoiding his eyes even harder. “You would,” he says. “Did the completely acceptable number of small town galleries not meet your expectations to such a point you needed to go to the literally most reviled tourist spot this side of the Columbia?”

“I am subject to enjoying natural marvels as much as the next man. Besides, all of the small town galleries were overburdened with pictures of Haystack Rock and I thought perhaps I should make an observance of my own.”

“Seeing is believing,” quips Will.

“Of all our senses, the eyes are the most easily deceived,” rebuts Hannibal.

Will declines a dinner invitation - he expects it, and for half a moment thinks his curiosity will get the better of him, but wisdom rules his Monday instead. Not effective barriers, Hannibal had said what feels to be a hundred years ago. Build another fort, says Will.

Hannibal seems to expect the response, and merely gestures with open palms - what can a man do? it says, and Will very nearly considers what it would be like to rearrange his teeth with a shovel. He does however allows for a quick drink at the whiskey bar as an offering of sorts, a casual aperitif, and lets Hannibal regale the next hour with stories of the Columbia

River basalt group, nesting terns, and the presence of a very serviceable La Marzocco espresso machine belonging to a ragtag coffee shop hiding in a gift store.

He's not ready to eat something Hannibal made, but he's anticipated listening to him from the start of work to now. Better to get it out of his system.

The rest of the week follows a similar rhythm, with the only consistent factor being the yellow umbrella and the coffee. The scarves don't get more wild, but they certainly are different. The morning gloom continues, though some days the sun peeks out and warms him from the deck of the boat, and picks up the silver glint of Hannibal's dark blonde hair in a way that makes Will think of hoarfrost.

It's slowly becoming some kind of philosophical Groundhog Day that Will gets progressively more and more annoyed with.

Tuesday is a simple offering - a pour-over black coffee that Hannibal tries diligently to get him to pair with a guava croissant, insisting that it will bring out the strong strawberry flavor of the roast. Will tells him that he prefers the coffee to taste like coffee, and the guava to be made of guava. Hannibal finds this all very funny, but settles for a conversation about berry farming in the region, and whether or not it's too late for blueberries. (*It's not - you hope he fucks off to a blueberry farm, gets inspired, and makes artisanal jams with the other men who slide around on the Kinsey scale in Tualatin. You are doubly amused to hear he goes wine tasting in Tualatin while the weather is reasonably fair, like the universe was just waiting for your suggestion, or that Hannibal actually is incredibly predictable, and that you have just been missing all the tells.*)

Wednesday morning dawns and Will very nearly beats Hannibal to the corner, leaving 10 minutes earlier than usual, though Hannibal's long-legged stride brings him even with Will's frantic walk down to the dock in less than half a block. Probably developed from all that time spent stalking. He's handed a mocha, and some sort of Spanish chorizo soup in a tidy white ceramic dish sealed with a lid and wrapped in cloth.

Hannibal goes to Portland for the duration of the work day, and comments on finding particularly fine cured meats near the Willamette River and the Pearl District. Will tells him

he has no idea what he's talking about, that he hates Portland, and he really should stop meeting him in the morning. "Starting the day with a routine is important," says Hannibal.

"I have one," says Will, grumbling into the collar of his coat as the wind rushes them up the hill to escape the evening rain.

"And now I do as well," says Hannibal, entirely too pleased with himself.

Thursday is flat whites, and some kind of cheese and meats wrapped in white butcher paper, and delicate slices of pear. Presumably holdovers from his trip to Portland, but Will wouldn't put it past Hannibal to stick cured meat in a suitcase and fly it from coast to coast for the smug satisfaction of a well-placed pun. "I hardly ever see you eat anything - it's a marvel of science you don't fall dead of your own poor habits."

"I'd certainly prefer that over yours," says Will.

Hannibal doesn't try to get him to eat it this time, but he does discreetly find a way for it to already be on board Daisy when he heads out into the harbor. When he discovers it, Will takes a vicious pleasure in befriending the gulls near the New Youngs Bay Bridge on his way to work, watching rounds of meat and carefully squared cheeses fly overboard and into the yellow and red mouths. On his walk back up the hill, Hannibal tells him about enjoying the day in Tillamook and sketching birds in the Nehalem Bay. Will discreetly hopes one of the seagulls sat fat and smug in front of the man and allowed itself to be encapsulated forever in his mind and sketchbook. (*And truly, isn't that how Hannibal feels every time he catches a guest enjoying a potentially previous guest at the dinner table?*)

Friday is tiny double-shot cappuccinos and mineral water. "You should be watching your blood pressure while on your medication."

Will rolls his eyes. "Don't you have actual patients to deal with at some point, or have you just decided to take a gap year on sabbatical like an errant college arts professor?" asks Will, walking fast and drinking faster. Seems like a good avoidant speed walk would be healthier than doubling his caffeine, but hey, he guesses there's one medical professional between the two of them, and he's historically terrible at his job. Hannibal as always just seems amused at Will's agitation, and follows in lockstep like business as usual.

When he gets home early, after shaking Hannibal off with a text message about going into Seaside for the afternoon and not being home for the duration of the evening, he checks all his prescriptions for the number of doses that should be left. The little yellow pills fall in a handful into his palm, settling in the creases, potent with the promise of good night's sleep, stability, security in human interaction with everyone but that man with the yellow umbrella and white-hot wit that just won't go away. (*You hope he isn't a manic delusion - so little else in your life is affected by his visitations, it's always a question of whether or not he's actually there, or if you're commuting to and from the dock with yourself and a bad memory.*) He hates the reminders that Hannibal knows about his anti-psychotics. He hates that the man was clever enough to get that much information to begin with.

There's a point in the afternoon around 3 that he hears something outside, where Winston is roaming the front balcony with the door open. From the downstairs front door in the little window in it, Will sees Hannibal walk up the sidewalk and observe the balcony, looking at Winston and the open side door to the living room with a peculiar shrewdness.

He didn't expect Will to be home. Will set him up to not expect him. He's not in the same sleek black rain jacket from this morning, but instead a nondescript blue one with practical waterproof boots and gloves. He looks like an entirely different person, and Hannibal does nothing if not by design.

Winston has never barked at Hannibal, nor has Buster, which Will has always taken for Hannibal's easy demeanor with them despite clearly having no strong love for dogs. The doctor has always greeted them soundlessly, and moved on. Will hasn't thought to question, even with months and months of separation, why they would still be easy with him in the absence of Hannibal watching them for his occasional trips out of town for FBI cases.

(*He's been here of course, while you're gone.*)

Will continues to watch from the door window, and Hannibal turns away from the house with a shrug. He's not sure if he imagines it, but for half a second he feels seen as the man passes his strange seeking eyes from the windows above, to the neighbors house, to the front door where Will stands breathlessly.

Midnight that Friday night brings Will to a quick breathed recounting of his pills after sleeping fretfully upstairs. No matter how much he reassures himself that they look like the same tablets in the same dosage, he's afraid something's missing.

What does Hannibal do during the day when Will is gone? Sure, he talks about trips down to Tillamook, or back into Portland for museums and food and the wine country of Tualatin, but how realistic is it that he's come all the way out here just to sample the local artisanal food? A man who's happy to hold down a full schedule of appointments, profiling, dedicated dinner hours, and still break down men like lambs at the fall culling can't possibly be challenged by a small town like Astoria.

Will puts the bottle next to Freddie's greyhound pin in the basement in the gap between the ceiling and one of the support beams. Seems as secret a spot as any other, even as the sensation of hoarding too much in the same spot comes to the forefront of his thoughts. It would be appropriate he guesses - someday, someone can find his loony pills, his accidental trophy pin, and his first earnest kill in one convenient cache under the house. They can take a picture and put it next to a headshot of him in the NOPD, and all that surreal crushing reality can be encapsulated in a couple of paragraphs in a text book. *Will Graham* , it reads, *operated under the radar for more than a decade with mental illness and wildly inappropriate impulses to replicate everything he sees if he looks at it long enough. Out of compulsion or inspiration remains to be seen.*

It's only when he's too exhausted to think about how *that* scholarly paper plays out that he's able to fall asleep. He thinks he might write the paper himself just to make sure no one gets it wrong - Will hates being misrepresented in the press. Criminally so.

When Will wakes up in the morning, his exhaustion melts into something more useful.

He tears paneling from the west side of the house for the duration of the morning, nervous energy converting to anger with each wooden board removed, anger to fury with each swing of the hammer to pin the new paneling to the framework. This is his house now, and he needs to be ready for the winter storms before November, ambiguously dangerous friend down the street or not.

(*It's telling that he's still your friend, even now, even when he wanders into your home like a ghost and moves all the contents around, and then moves into your mind and moves all the contents around in there as well.*)

When evening comes, Will is on his raised porch again with the dogs. There's a heaping pile of old wood to the left of the house that he is studiously ignoring in the name of sticking to his Saturday afternoon rituals. He's idly texting Beau about termite treatments and how shitty his window seals on the boat cabin are when Winston raises his head and starts wagging his tail lazily, looking towards the kitchen side door.

Will would like to say he's surprised when Hannibal appears, dressed in a loud sport coat (*tan, white and navy this time - how nautical of him*) over navy trousers and sensible brown brogues. The only reason he pays them any mind is the sound of the deck creaking under them, the first thing his eyes dart to. He's really not surprised though.

Will is, however, quietly furious, like he's still swinging the hammer, watching nails disappear into the hard tissues of the wood paneling. Perhaps he hasn't done enough housekeeping today after all.

He's so casually comfortable walking out on the front deck, that Will is uncertain for a moment if he'd actually barred the door when he came in from the hardware store today, halfway ready to throw his phone out and continue up the coast. What's more is that he navigates quickly to him - he's certain that he would have heard him in the living room where the windows overlook the balcony and front yard below. He has it on good authority that there's at least five floorboards that sound like the end days even if you're light on your feet. So he's been in here enough to recognize even that.

"You've been breaking into my house," says Will, not bothering with dispensing shallow greetings.

Hannibal looks up and down the deck, eyes Will's chair as well as the dogs. "I would think that was rather self-evident seeing as I'm up here. I'd like to properly speak this evening, on the same ground if it's all the same to you. While our morning and evening walks are charmingly obtuse, a week is a long time to avoid the point."

“No, I mean earlier, and no, it’s not all the same,” Will bites, taking a long swig. “To the average person, locked doors generally mean ‘do not enter’, not ‘are the windows locked’. I know we have to allow for the possibility that you don’t identify with the average person, but that particular language remains largely the same across the social and fiscal classes.” He turns his chair roughly, but doesn’t stand. He checks his phone, and sends a brief message - ***Text you later daddy, unless I’m dead. Make sure you get the boat.***

“Why, exactly, do you need to be in my house when I’m gone during the day?” asks Will, incredulously smiling, heart beginning to thrum hotly in his throat. “Or at night, let’s not discriminate on time frames. While I’d like to think I could hear you, I’m absolutely certain you’ve got a few tricks up your sleeve for that. Good job, by the way, avoiding the loose board by the porch door.”

Hannibal seems to pick up on Will’s mood, glancing out to the yard and back at Will, giving Buster the briefest of scratches when the little dog comes up to him for attention - Will mentally congratulates him. *Astounding work* , he thinks. *How quickly he must surmise the tone of the situation. What cunning, what guile, knowing that I’ve had it up to here with his remarkable bullshit today* .

“I see this is probably going to be unproductive - how much exactly have you had today?” Hannibal walks over anyway, scratching Winston’s ear as well. He’s uncommonly soft with them, and Will hates that it makes him feel keen to forgive.

“Clearly not enough,” Will says with a toast and another drink. “This is just a break - busy times we’re having here, replacing siding. How much more will I need to drink for you to accept I’m not really in the mood for this?”

“Probably more than you can actually stomach. Your father drank me under the table, but I doubt you have quite the same capacity, though certainly the same meanness.”

Will gives a dry hoot. “Meanness he says,” he croons to Winston and Buster, who trot over to him, bothered by his strange responses. He tries not to be this way around them, but a bad temper and bad night of sleep cut his fuse short. “All that anyone ever does is question my capacity. What exactly do you think I *do* have the capacity for? Other than the usual refrain - think outside of the box, something more creative.”

“Refrains are intentionally repetitive,” says Hannibal. “They establish theme in the narrative.”

“Yours is getting tiring,” snarls Will, chair squeaking beneath him as he shifts, standing rapidly and reaching out for all that loud, stupid plaid that has no business being here.

It’s the squeak of wood and nails against each other is what tells Will what happens next. Hands meet jacket, and arms with hands holding jacket swing the bulk of Hannibal towards the railing of the porch. Hannibal, despite doing his best to twist out of Will’s grasp, hits the railing with a rush of air from his lungs, hardly even a gasp, but the railing on a hundred year old house is hardly prepared to support all of his weight. Even as he leans awkwardly over the edge, for a moment silhouetted against the green of the grass below, the top of the railing gives way.

And down he goes. It’s only a few seconds of work that sends him crash landing in the front yard, barely missing his freshly planted holly and hydrangea bushes.

Will’s hands hurt.

Will takes a sip of his beer.

The wreckage of the porch railing is a group of old greyed wood planks, where Hannibal has landed atop them, looking the most blank faced and rigid he’s ever seen him. When he stumbles up, Hannibal’s forehead looks abraded, and his thoughts running a mile a minute.

The thing that Will thinks makes the strongest visual is a long tear in the shoulder of Hannibal’s jacket. There must have been a nail, or a long splinter of wood that gave way when the bannister breaks under his weight, catching the broad weave of the wool and tearing as gravity reasserts itself. (*And how about that? Hannibal is bound by physics after all. He can’t be everywhere at once after all - there must be some times that even he can’t saunter into your space, ignoring walls, and locks, and all the hundreds of feet of steps you take away from his orbit.*) There’s just the hint of spreading damp darkness coming from the long-sleeved shirt beneath the tear. He must have hurt himself.

He can hardly say that Will hurt him (*first*).

“Defenestration,” Will deadpans, “is traditionally a Medieval tool of the masses to remove negligent and incompetent leadership.” He turns the beer can in his hand.

“Done in good Bohemian style, I see,” says Hannibal, prodding at his shoulder and neck with his good arm, panting against the growing ache he’s no doubt feeling. The sneer on his face is unmistakable, and Will can’t look away from the sore roll of Hannibal’s feet, feeling out injuries as a hunter feels out the flesh of a fallen deer. How appropriate - victim to his own pursuits. “Though the absence of a window does call into question if it’s actual defenestration.”

“It’s an old house,” says Will. “Might want to get that checked for tetanus.”

“I suppose I can expect some overwrought accounting for this via email or text? Seeing as that seems to be the only mode of communication you are honest with these days.”

“I don’t need to account for it. You know why it happened.”

Hannibal smiles and then actually laughs, one loud huff that shows his teeth which are a little bloody from a bitten cheek or lip. He looks like the animal Will knows he can be, but hasn’t personally seen. It’s enchanting, like watching a coyote with a rabbit. Natural. Whatever he finds funny, he doesn’t share. He simply dusts himself off again, and walks through the grass and down the block.

The image of Hannibal limping off into the night is gratifying - it feels so good to feel something other than miserable. He replays the visual of him falling over and over again until it’s not enough. Instead, he imagines lifting one of the planks in hand, and him, meeting Hannibal on the ground, beating him over and over again.

He said killing Hannibal in Baltimore wouldn’t do anything.

He never said hurting him wouldn't feel good.

He doesn't see Hannibal Sunday at all, and spends the day with a 22 gauge shotgun near at hand. It's a pretty gun, all things considered, with a pair of pheasants etched into the metal guard on the butt. He's supposed to shoot birds with it, hence the entirely uncryptic decor, but all he can think about is how satisfying it would be to see the shot scatter and tear into the monster down the hall that he can't shake off.

"Must you always shoot first?" asks Freddie, sitting cross-legged and cross faced in the corner of the bedroom.

"I used to not be able to shoot at all," says Will, admiring the protruding glint of the sight guide atop the barrel. "My learning curve is proving to be exponential."

He drinks. Of course he does. He jokes in a text to Lori to check on his dogs if no one's heard from him by Wednesday, and spends most of the evening buried in a book. Tonight, *Mother Night* rests in his hands, Vonnegut's wit stirring him. (*We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be. Isn't that right, Will?*)

By midnight, he's tired, and prepared to accept that he might wake up in a sea cave or some other decidedly dramatic environment tomorrow to have painful revenge enacted on him with a condescending narrative over the sound of the Pacific the entire time. It's rather unfortunate because he could really get behind the sea burial concept were it not for the promise of Hannibal Lecter probably talking about Spanish sailors and the discovery of the edge of the new world or something equally profound and ultimately obnoxious. (*"Ye intruders beware. Crushing death and grief, Soaked with blood, Of the trespassing thief!" you recite to Winston, who merely turns his head in confusion. You wonder if you can leave a note for Hannibal to include that somewhere as well as some pirate paraphernalia, but the fact that he won't recognize the reference and the tie to Astoria is almost enough to make you reconsider your entire friendship with him up to this point, sans all the murdering and convincing you that there's nothing good inside you. Classless bastard, really.*)

Will checks the windows, locks the doors, and builds his mound of blankets on the air mattress with a dog on either side of him. Their mindless satisfaction in curling in close is a balm that makes him ok with closing his eyes for a moment.

He prays Hannibal's torn shoulder hurts the way that Catholics pray for safe rest - fervently, and then he finally sleeps.

Monday morning dawns, and he's all in one piece. He follows his religious program of routine steps, and walks to the diner for shitty coffee. El Conquistador rises for another day plundering the coast of its rust-bucket boats, and the woman manning the counter laughs when he smooths his beard with both hands and yawns, and comments that she hasn't seen him all week. He walks to his boat for an altogether uninteresting day of manual labor. Frank is a grouch. Lori is a gossip. Scow scratches him, and then Scow comes back an hour later like nothing happened. Cats. Bosses. Coworkers. A bizarre return to the routine for the day.

In the evening, he docks his boat, he grabs a burger to go, and he ascends the hill.

And there, in front of his house, Hannibal Lecter stands, stacking planks of wood.

He's slow at it, moving it from where it was clearly dropped off by the hardware store or the mill yard workers. There's a distinct stiffness in his injured side that Will feels the ache of even from 20 feet away. Hannibal deserves it. Hannibal still wears it like an unfortunately ugly accessory sent by a beloved relative that can be endured. This is surprisingly endearing.

"Redwood," he says, at Will's confused look. "I've been told it's the best option for this climate, and responsibly sourced from the region. One wouldn't want to alter the character of the structure." When Will continues to stare at him like he's grown a second head, he smiles. "I've broken your railing, so I thought it only appropriate to replace it, though I suspect you will be a more deft hand than me assembling it."

Will sighs, pulls a french fry out of his to-go bag, and chews it. The fantasy of grabbing the plank and simply braining Hannibal like a seal with bad timing comes roaring back over the granules of salt and starchy potato. It tastes good. The idea too - any of them. There's a gun on the second floor, a wrench on the first, and probably a good tarp somewhere in the basement even if there's not access to the subfloor anymore.

But he’s been brought an offering, and there’s nothing about it that Hannibal could have altered. Long planks of red-brown lumber, smelling of the mill and the slightest damp of rain. So a gift that’s what it looks like. Rare. At least a little honest. He only knows Hannibal was holding his breath when he sets down his bag of dinner, eats another handful of fries, and starts stacking wood planks next to him, in orderly clean lines next to the house.

He can reward honesty by not throwing it aside.

“We’ll have to do the whole thing, you know,” says Will. “Won’t match or stain the same way.”

“Then it’s a good thing I bought more than was necessary,” says Hannibal, and Will thinks for a moment that excess truly is the standard by which Hannibal lives, and just laughs even as he wants to pull the eye teeth from the man’s mouth, to see if it would stop his need to constantly win conversations (*even if he loses wars*).

He eats his to-go burger and fries, and relishes Hannibal’s silence for the duration of it, helping move the long lengths of wood one by one, internalizing the imagined pain of Hannibal's bad shoulder until he knows it’s earnest and rust-red and all Will’s doing.

act 3 - and when ordinary life shackles me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal is a terrible construction assistant. Will knows he probably has no right to have thought it was going to go any other way, but the staggering magnitude of this while doing basic construction is almost enough to motivate him to kill Hannibal by default to spare Will the irritation.

It begins with the deck, where Hannibal talks about Japanese wood joinery to the point of excess within two days of the new lumber delivery and the beginning of their new understanding. (*“Sukiya-daiku,” spoken in smoky, clipped syllables, that hiss in your ears. “Stands for hundreds of years with proper care. Very complimentary to Craftsman style homes, an interesting contrast to your Victorian themes.”*) While their truce is still too new and too uneasy for a proper argument, Hannibal makes a remarkable effort to metaphorically browbeat him with descriptions of the Sanneizaka and the tea houses of Gion in Kyoto and how nice it would look with the all-heart redwood lumber against the white house.

Against better judgment and a brief mental fallout in the hardware store when he learns he’ll have to special order something to make his project work, Will finds himself looking up methods of dove-tailing wooden beams to support the new front porch balcony out of curiosity when Hannibal leaves for the evening. (*You’re not convinced he didn’t buy out the stock to get his way - maybe he’s keeping a cistern of steel nails next to where Miriam Lass was, one last indignity before polishing his halo for his trip to see you.*) For what it’s worth, the Japanese methods are not what he expects at first blush. It’s very attractive, very clean lined, and nowhere near as ornate as he had been thinking. Simple, strong, and ultimately a good solution.

When Hannibal begins to critique his method one afternoon after furiously shaving chips of wood from a joint, Will raises one of his wood striking chisels.

“Is this my porch, which you so graciously couldn’t have the decency to fall over without disassembling a huge portion of it and at least die, or is it yours?”

Hannibal puts both palms up apologetically, and merely smiles. It’s his go-to for most of Will’s quips over the last two weeks.

A fair assessment is that Hannibal doesn't lack at all when it comes to craftsmanship and attention to detail. This is appropriate - Will would never believe that Hannibal was just some kind of murder and dinner theatre idiot savant that just stumbled through everything else up to this point. (*If you ask Hannibal, everything is a happy accident, including you.)* There had to be some basis of skill behind all the elaborate build-ups beyond his cooking chops. Even just the physics behind the fly tying and body positioning of the infirmary guard that serves as Will's ticket out of the mental hospital speak to excellent math skills and careful consideration of small things. Half of the joy of creation is the challenge, and the other half is surely that no one can call his bluff.

If Hannibal is told what the desired effect is, and given instruction on the method in which its done, Will suspects that not only would anything in the house be done better than Will could do it, but that it would probably set some kind of new gold standard for grout mixing, or stone setting, or any other number of Old World techniques that Will really doesn't have the eye for or desire to replicate without provocation. By all rights, it's Hannibal that should be shaving the joints of this handrail to sit on a new post, not Will, but Will doesn't want him to have equity here. Replacing the materials he has broken is right. It is not a debt, and while intended as a gift, he tries to not allow it more value than that. Will's simply using the materials for repairing things to restore usefulness.

Hannibal is spinning a narrative even in the construction of a wooden post, which Will doesn't know if he likes the implications of. It's elegant, but foreign. So too can it be said that Hannibal is creating, and creating means stylistic differences a mile wide from Will's more practical and humble solutions.

"Surely you aren't going to just paint the backsplash in the kitchen."

Will rolls his eyes, and irritably shuffles paint color cards like a playing deck. There's an inordinate number of grey squares intermingled with the occasional pop of color. Will would rather die than admit he's actually very taken with a dark pine green that is almost black that Hannibal slides into the paint cards the day before as well as a Wedgwood blue. It looks good - the mere presence of it's good taste is offensive. He'd have to switch out the drawer pulls and other hardware to make it work with what he has. He doesn't *want* to switch out the hardware.

"I repair boats in a small town," says Will. 'We're not exactly talking about Architecture Digest budgets here, and there's already the original tile on the kitchen floor that looks fine if

you’re desperate for some kind of character.”

He’s probably going to switch out the hardware.

Hannibal fingers his way through a magazine on the other side of the kitchen bar counter, leaning against the wall. Some kind of periodical from the University of Oxford about microforms and preserving records of cathedrals. There’s no furniture to sit on, so he stands looking obnoxiously relaxed despite having to favor his injured shoulder. Will would like it if he could look just a little bit unkempt for once instead of attractively comfortable in his navy cable-knit sweater and collared shirt.

“Oh I’m not worried about that,” Hannibal says, lightly prodding at the magazine’s pages and favoring him with a brief look. “Between you, the dogs, the motley collection of thrifted chairs and books in the house, and your inability to finish any one project, there’s character for days, an absolute dramatis personae of tattered decision making. Underdogs everywhere, metaphorically and literally.”

Laying in a patch of sunlight on the wooden floors of the living room, neither Winston nor Buster stirs, every bit as comfortable as Hannibal. Will worries his lip with his teeth, and snorts. “Don’t forget my kitchenware. The jam jars are really carrying the design on this one.”

“Believe me, I haven’t forgotten.” To Hannibal’s left, sitting primly on the edge of the white quartz countertop, the usual blue and yellow starred one is halfway full with ice and Lillet Blanc.

“Well as long as we’re even - I know the sin of poor interior decor is at least as terrible as misdiagnosing people for the joy of scientific discovery, and who am I to stop the scales of justice?”

Hannibal, for all that he would never roll his eyes, gets about as close as he can with pursed lips and a particular twitch of his eyelids that reads as both amusement and annoyance. “Your sense of humor is as terrible as your ability to carry a remodel to its conclusion. At least tile it so it’s less difficult to clean,” he says with no small amount of exasperation.

“I can assure you it’s much easier to clean than when I first started,” Will deadpans, and thinks of the smell of bleach at 2 in the morning, dogs dancing around him anxiously nosing him and the scouring pad wearing at the skin of his palms. Just a little bit deeper, and that red stain will be gone.

(*Out damned spot.*)

Will learns a second thing in short order that he is more on edge about than merely irritated to experience, and that is Hannibal’s insistence on being close *constantly* .

It’s never been beyond him that Hannibal is tactile. He’s one of the first people to get into Will’s personal space since a past girlfriend during his master’s program, a well meaning older woman in New Orleans that was a colleague, and his own father who is generally more inclined to sit directly opposite of him, but never hesitates to give a dry kiss to his forehead and squeeze his hand when it’s time to go. (*It’s fleeting, but as natural as dressing yourself, or rubbing the bridge of your nose. You think nothing of it, until you find you miss it terribly.*) The older man has never taken Will’s prickly nature as anything more meaningful than what it’s like to pet a stray dog, never offended by refusal, seemingly gratified when accepted.

It’s typically small things, like a hand on his shoulder, or clasping his elbow to ground him. He has snatches of memory that feel more tender than that following seizures, and those raise his hackles for the infantile comfort they were meant to be, but for the most part it has never been obtrusive.

The manifestation of this starts to transform as Will begins letting Hannibal into the house in the afternoons after work, albeit reluctantly. It’s not so much that Hannibal is actually touching him more, as much as challenging his personal space again - standing too close, sighing and trying to push Will’s longer hair out of his face when Will refuses to make eye contact or do it himself. (*“You’re going to saw your own hand off if you can’t see what you’re doing.”*) Will continues to threaten to throw him over the side of the balcony again, while there’s no railing up for him to break.

It’s approaching 7 pm on a Wednesday, and the sun is almost completely gone as they work by the light of the porch light, which is neither adequate or very bright to begin with. It’s

more chilly than usual, with a drizzly grey evening working into a cold night.

“I’ll grow my hair down to my ankles if I want,” he snarls from the base of a railing post, “and you’ll do me the favor of leaving it alone.” When Hannibal follows his pattern and sighs almost inaudibly, straightening the pile of wood slats on the balcony, he adds, “I know, big ask. If I cut off one of my fingers because I’m too stupid to move it out of the way, then that’s just Darwinism at work.” He combs it back with a frustrated hand, catching the tangles between his fingers, pulling it into a loose knot. “Pass me the plank on the left, the one with the notch cut about three quarters of the way down.”

Hannibal kneels, lifting with ease and wearing an attractive pair of camel colored work gloves. He has steadfastly worn them from day two of what Will mentally calls the *great reconstruction* , making glib statements about his hands as a surgeon are his life. (*You mean reconstructing the house, but also reconstructing how you understand the way the two of you interact - it’s embarrassingly similar to before being arrested, despite that you know better. Despite the occasional needling comment. Despite truth, reason, and consequence. How blessed Hannibal must be in his absence of accountability. What will you do about that* ?)

“Excellent, then you agree with the theory that people who do foolish things really do have the consequences of that action coming to them.”

(*What **will** you do about that?)*

“Well,” Will says with an exasperated sigh of his own, “I don’t think cutting someone off in traffic really justifies premeditated first-degree murder, but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt that you actually mean that if they were side swiped right after that it might have not happened if they had just been patient.” He lines the plank up to the pole, measuring his sliding dovetail joint - a little more off the edge, and it will finally be flush. He sets it down, and grabs for a chisel and mallet.

Hannibal watches with each strike with an unusually flat gaze. It reminds him of the moments watching Hannibal rise from the ground, brushing the fall off like a cloak. “I’m a fan of leaving things to chance,” he says, “but past experience tells me that punishment very rarely finds us without an arbitrator.”

Will smooths an edge, and raises it back up to the post for fitting. The joint is good - all he has to do is make sure the fit on the connecting ends is done. “And what qualifies you for that position? Academics? Placement on the food chain?”

“Unfortunately for them, chance.”

Will rolls his neck. “Wasn’t it Lincoln that said not to criticize, that they’re just us under different circumstances? I’m sure there’s been a fair number of people who would have dearly loved to wring your neck over some minor complaint. I’ve wanted to wring your neck over far more substantial things, and yet here you are, surveying like the pharaoh as the pyramids are built.”

“If you’d like some help, you need only ask. I’ve shaved bone down before, in legitimate medical settings, before you begin your tirade on that account - I’m sure redwood is not so difficult in comparison, but I’ll concede to your expertise,” Hannibal says with another Cheshire smile. “To answer your actual point, that you haven’t actually wrung my neck is a matter of timing instead of inability. Or are you going to pretend Matthew Brown didn’t give it the old college try on your behalf?”

Will beats the post into place, watching the dovetail seal. “There’s nothing saying I won’t try again.”

Hannibal continues to smile, his face darkened in the dim porch light, yellow glow tracing the bones in his face - a backwater town’s play on torchlight he supposes. “But Will, I am simply you in different circumstances.” It’s said lightly, but the satire is thick.

Will smiles, and nods. Point taken. “Something like me, but I guess I can’t throw you in with the rest of them. I’m not always entirely certain that you’re a real person, so it’s probably false equivalency.” Will says, checking the rail end that hangs alone between the porch and wide open air. There’s a feeling of vertigo, looking at it this way in the growing night. He’ll have to finish this part tomorrow - can’t see the ends well enough to refine the cuts.

When Will turns, Hannibal is again too close, just inches away. He contemplates if Hannibal will push *him* off the porch this time, and feels the tingle of fear in his legs for half a second. It would be easy. It was for him too.

But Hannibal just raises an arm to pull a large wood chip from his hair, eyeing the mallet still in his hand and grabbing for his wrist to take it from him. He hums in thought, before responding. “Real, but perhaps not what you consider a conventional person.” He smiles, wryly this time. “Thank you, Will, that’s a very high compliment coming from you.” He’s slow to release Will’s arm, even when the comfortable weight of the mallet is gone.

Will shivers, and thinks of being disarmed in the dining room of Hannibal’s house, Abel Gideon watching on. He thinks of melting away, and letting Hannibal hold him like a spilling glass of wine, catching what he can, shrugging at the loss. He also thinks again of the probability of Hannibal tossing him from the house, and how it sits equally likely with Hannibal not, and if he’s ok with that.

He pulls away, combing loose hair from his face before it can be remarked on again. (*You cannot suffer another touch right now - you don't want to let the line be undrawn* .)

Hannibal is unusually merciful, instead weighing the heft of the mallet in his hand with a jaunty toss and catch. “There’s still no food in your house, and I will spare myself the indignity of asking if you will return to the flat with me. I saw a place near the bar that does oysters named for your avian equivalent - shall we?”

(*You can’t ignore it forever - you understand better than most that you can’t make a lamb out of a lion, at least not for long* .)

“I guess we shall.”

It’s late, Will is by himself, and the night is calling for something cheap that will peel paint, but instead fits in next to his nice drinks, looks just as nice sitting in the glass. Hannibal’s not invited for these kinds of moments, early dinner in town or not. They belong to him and his father - it’s a mood that they can share in perfect synchronicity.

Tonight, he is grasping at the straws of his anger, which is righteous but guttering with each small kindness that Hannibal throws him between conversations, or plates of seafood as the circumstances stand today. He's confused by them, keeps waiting for the pain of a lie to strike on the other side. It's what he's been taught to expect.

It's refreshing to have Hannibal's company, which is lively, bright, and effervescently amused by most things. It is also often tiring in that Will is perpetually skirting around one sensitive subject or another in the name of not spoiling his own mood, or triggering a deeper meanness in Hannibal that he's certain is hiding somewhere in this morass of connection.

(*How does one casually bring up cannibalism? "Hey, do you think you could let me in on why you have your preference in meat? What coarse memory are you choking on that makes choking on someone's delicate pancreas preferable? Did somebody touch you wrong once as a kid? Does the vore add to your archaic need to revelate sins, or is this about resource practicality? Are you ever embarrassed that you've reduced your unseen trauma to a series of puns and unpronounceable dishes in a prix fixe meal, or is that by* choice*? Is that the* joke*?"*)

(*How does one casually tell someone that they ruined you, and you don't want it to happen again, but you think it might because all of your own deficiencies have been revealed in his, and this time will be your fault?*)

(*How does one casually bring up an emotional dependency that's starting to be a physical dependency as well? Does he understand what a lonely person you are, and how your days are fuller with him in them? That you're only bothered by the closeness because you don't have a defense for it and are afraid he knows it? Are you stupid enough to show your hand, or will you cut off his instead?*)

He doesn't know how to handle Hannibal's presence in the long-term. Surely the man will grow bored playing at contractor and devil's advocate when there's nothing left to advocate for. Freddie's not getting any deader, and Will doesn't know if he can understand Hannibal better than he does. Anything he tries to interpret further must surely be a disappointment to Hannibal, and even if Hannibal guides him through it, Will is not Saint John - he won't write augers of what he has seen. Will that truly be enough for Hannibal Lecter's ego? To just be seen? Can Will stand to even give him something, when everything else has been unequal between them?

How do you get even with someone who took something from you? He texts Beau before slipping upstairs with a book, drink in hand, listening to the mattress squeal under his weight, and the cars sift through the roads until sleep takes the neighborhood, but not Will.

At 1 am, a response.

That depends. Did you get it back? Was it valuable to you, or are you just mad because it was yours? You'll lose something either way, so think hard.

Will thinks on that, puts his book down, and pours a drink again. He'll be sick again at this rate, but he'd hate to think hard and stumble on an answer he doesn't like.

Will discovers very abruptly that Hannibal is actually far more engaged in the white disaster house while Will is gone for the day for work than he would prefer. It's not a particularly insidious discovery this time - just a completely unwanted gift.

In the first couple days following their outdoor altercation and Hannibal's gift of redwood lumber, he acts like he is casually measuring the width and depth of the counters to confirm Will's already very exacting sketches with notes on those sorts of things, but otherwise is more like an obnoxious feed of interior design information that Will has very little patience with.

The gig is up when he leaves for work one day only to come home and find an exceedingly fancy gas stove with brass handles wrapped in shipping plastic sitting in the middle of his driveway, carefully raised on cardboard and felt blankets to protect it from scuffs. Hannibal stands beside it, yellow umbrella protecting him and his ill-bought gift, looking not at all bothered that he has waited outside the house likely since its delivery. Both Hannibal and the stove have a very attractive look to them that radiates smugness.

Thankfully, he and the stove are not *in* the house, or Will would have to throw him off something more substantial this time to get the point to stick, like maybe the bridge, or off the side of Cape Disappointment. Idly, he wonders if he could see the yellow umbrella from the balcony if it fell from that kind of distance. It really is an eyesore.

“What is that?” he asks.

“A stove,” says Hannibal. “I thought it was rather obvious. Or did you mean the umbrella? I hope you’re amiable to matte black appliances.”

Will rubs the bridge of his nose with his hand, smoothing two fingers along the cheekbone, and counts to five. “Should I ask how much it cost?”

“That would be uncouth. Besides, you’d likely not want to hear I paid more to have it shipped quickly, or else we could be here until next February with still no oven to show for it.” Hannibal says blithely, gesturing with a black gloved hand, flicking the umbrella subtly behind him. He’s very smooth in his casual disregard and his long black pea coat and shiny black monkstrap shoes. “They almost didn’t deliver it - absolutely certain they had the wrong address when they saw the house. It’s unfortunate that they couldn’t take it upstairs for you.”

Will frowns, and pulls the house key out, feeling it between his fingers. “If that’s you asking for a copy of the key, I’m gonna just tell you no right now. Especially if you intend to start making unilateral decisions about my house.”

Hannibal stands, and rolls his shoulders to shrug off Will’s attitude. “Simply a question of efficiency, but a 100 kilo stove shouldn’t be a problem between the two of us.”

Will feels anger prickle at the corners of his mouth, frowning. “What happened to you renting a loft with an adequate stove? Maybe I liked my busted-ass electric one with the scorch marks on the burners.” Will opens the door, Hannibal following after. Dogs pool at their feet, dancing in excitement and chasing each other up the stairs. “You shouldn’t need my kitchen when you have yours, and we both know I’m not likely about to pursue my Cordon-Bleu certification.”

“I thought you might be less averse to things prepared in your kitchen with your own ingredients.”

(*He’s not wrong - how do you feel about being so obvious?*)

Will rubs his face again, takes comfort in the chilled fingers against burning eyes. “I’m less averse to things of my own, but do you get that this stove won’t ever be mine? It’s not even kind of what I would have chosen for myself, and I’d rather pay for things. It’s a goddamn beacon of *your* taste in the middle of *my* house, and I’m not going to thank you for it,” he says stiffly. “You should have asked.”

“I see that I should have.”

Will looks down the stairs, surprised, but Hannibal puts a hand on his shoulder, passes him, and throws his coat onto the counter in the kitchen. The suit beneath is the same color as the pine green paint swatch. The camel colored work gloves come out, and the seamlessly pleasant smile slides in place. “If you wish it gone, I will take it with me, though you’ll have to bear with me in that I don’t have a flatbed truck to move it right this instance. It’s not the kind of thing you send back, so I will have to find an alternative home for it.”

Will contemplates - looks out the front windows once he’s entered the kitchen to the misty bridge, to the grass below, and the plastic-wrapped gas range sitting idly in the late afternoon gloom. Contemplates Hannibal, who seems to think any minute now that Will is going to follow him downstairs, just as confident as a crocodile.

Well that’s an easy enough decision.

“Get rid of it,” he says, and pulls a beer out of the fridge.

The look on Hannibal’s face is decidedly confused, before he smiles, licking his top teeth with annoyance. “You’re quite sure?” he asks.

“Oh very,” says Will.

Hannibal does what he asks, and in a surprisingly short time. It’s 8 pm by the time Hannibal arranges to get a truck and pulls up in front of the house again.

“It’s going to get water-logged if it sits in the downpour tonight,” Hannibal says crisply, working with a staccato force and in his more practical work clothes that Will has only seen him in once before. “You may not have much use for it, but it’s a fine item that I would prefer to not let go to waste.”

“So you’re saying the stove gets more consideration than I did?”

Hannibal has absolutely no response for that, in a rare lack of wit or guile, looking instead vaguely martyred and damp in the incoming autumn weather. Will enjoys the whole situation immensely, even if he does find himself in the unenviable role of taking second chair to a gas range.

Hannibal instead opts to move the stove by himself, and Will does his best to convey that he will not be lifting a finger. He instead sits on the balcony with the authority of a king surveying the kingdom, with a tall glass of iced Crown Royal in his hand and a wool blanket over his shoulders. A bag of salt and vinegar potato chips from the gas station that the dogs studiously beg for complete the picture. If Will has a final incarnation as an embittered old man, surely it’s this.

Only once Hannibal has single-handedly managed to raise the stove into the truck, and is almost done strapping it down does Will finally speak.

“Seems a shame to get rid of it,” says Will. “Seeing as you can’t return it.”

“Yes, it rather is,” Hannibal responds in kind with tight clipped words, stretching his shoulders and arms, flexing fingers until the ache of lifting has worn off. The rental truck’s keys dangle between his fingers. Will won’t lie and say he hasn’t enjoyed the spectacle, though after watching the older man lift the fancy appliance into the truck bed he’s more certain than ever that Hannibal could probably just break him in half if he ever gets tired of playing this game and Will doesn’t think to strike first. He wonders if he’ll need to be ready now.

Will smiles. “I accept your gift. Ask next time.”

Hannibal for one brief moment is blank-faced, before he gives that same single incredulous laugh that Will is starting to grow fond of.

(*You bitter little thing, he must be thinking. Well done.*)

Because Will is a (*sometimes*) good friend, and because Will understands that an 8 hour workday is a long time to entertain yourself with no vocation and only a small portfolio of seasonally appropriate activities along the coast, he concedes to allow Hannibal into the house during the day to work on projects. He has a better eye for the fine details, he’s actually quite vocal about it, and Will honestly doesn’t care as long as he doesn’t end up with the Addams Family mansion by the end of it and Hannibal asks before doing anything crazy.

“Only the kitchen, living room, and bathroom,” Will says imperiously. “Stay the fuck out of my bedroom, the spare room, and the basement. No skulls, memento mori, and Gustav Courbet. Preferably nothing reminiscent of a Gothic cathedral.”

“Well that just leaves me with anatomical models, elegiacs, and Hieronymus Bosch. A very complete if limited triad, if I do say so. Are you professing a preference for Byzantine or Renaissance themes instead?”

Will rolls his eyes. “The key opens the downstairs front door. The back door is a different key. Please leave it locked, and the balcony closed. Buster’s a runner, and there’s not the

same kind of room to wear him out like in Wolf Trap. He'll be at the dock before you can say 'come back'."

Hannibal, who has watched the dogs before and that the dogs like because dogs are stupid and will trust just about anyone with the right leverage and tone of voice, simply nods, taking the key. Will does his best to not show his anxiety - there's nothing for Hannibal to find, and Will knows to look for things that Hannibal might leave instead.

(*You half hope he does - it would make things clearer. Easier to throw the whole friendship away, when right now everything feels like an overreaction in the face of repeated exposure, repeated normalcy. You keep providing opportunities to fail, and setting the bar lower.*)

Hannibal doesn't waste much time. He orders a refrigerator to match his absurd matte black stove in short order, brass handles and knobs for the cabinets, and miscellaneous fixtures needed to replumb for a pot filler and dishwasher. He repaints the living room. He removes and orders new jade green tile for the kitchen backsplash and the one bathroom in the house, something German sounding that Will tells him he didn't really budget for. "Zellige," states Hannibal. "It's very en vogue. It will suit the older themes."

Every time he tries to get a receipt, Hannibal acts as if he's asked after an exact cause of death, or supplementing olive oil with vegetable. While it's fun to solicit this response, he does start thinking of the kitchen as belonging to Hannibal rather than him. As long as he can continue to put beer in the fridge and chill glasses and bait fish in the freezer, he can deal with that. If he gets double crossed again, he'll just burn the house down instead of selling it and having to deal with that association (*again*).

The appliances and fixtures are all very lovely and the right size, but Hannibal freely admits that installation isn't really in his purview.

"That's your stage, Will. I could certainly do it, but I don't enjoy it the same way that you do, I think. My kinetic outlets are more distinctive."

"Is that an officious way of saying I do the blue collar work around here, or that your sense of feng shui is innately tied to body arrangement?"

“We all have a calling,” says Hannibal, and Will takes immense pleasure in accidentally getting water all over him when he installs a side sprayer. Everyone has to be humble in his house, even fashion-oriented, gestalt obsessed man eaters.

Eventually, and he’s sure Hannibal has already been down there a thousand times, crawling into every crevice like a spider, they find themselves in the basement. Will is using a table saw to cut the edge of new crown moulding that will go in the living room. Hannibal watches, content to let Will control this, but his eyes occasionally drift to the shiny dark new concrete in the basement floor.

“An old septic tank,” Will says, doesn’t look up from his band saw. “Wasn’t functional, replaced before I got here with a proper hookup to the city network.”

Hannibal smiles with teeth, and hands him the next piece of moulding.

Will feels confident he knows, even though he doesn’t feel any tells in his own face.

(*By the pricking of your thumbs, something wicked this way comes.*)

Hannibal only compliments the smooth finish and hopes that the color cures equally over time. He’d hate for something to mar the shiny finish, and he hopes Will can properly cover the floor in time.

It makes Will nervous how Hannibal thinks in terms of doing things together - going to dinner, going for drinks, to the hardware store, to the shoreline, to Seaside or across the river to Long Beach. There are some places Will doesn’t take Hannibal, like the boat and to work, but there’s a nagging dread that someone’s going to see them together and ask questions at

some point, and that Hannibal is just waiting for that. He's not confident he isn't being manipulated into accepting Hannibal as a fixture in his life.

After week four, Will begins to think Hannibal doesn't want to kill him after all. This is a dangerous thought.

They eat dinner together, they push each other's buttons, he lets Hannibal order furniture to be placed in the house, and a truly massive Turkish rug that Will swears up and down that he's going to command Winston to urinate on just to make a point. He refuses to point out that the tree and stag motif woven in gold and white against the green and blue is a throwback that he's not sure he enjoys. Technically there's no skulls- technically. But soon, everything about the room becomes about the rug.

"I spent the greater part of a week refinishing this damn floor - twice. Why on earth would you cover it up with that old rug?"

"The pattern is very flattering to the kitchen, and while your very Franciscan life of austerity hasn't merited a need to think about places to sit, there's a couch coming at some point and it would be unfortunate to scrape up all your hard work. Your Hancock chair will find its way to your bedroom, forever unmolested by change, where you are welcome to drink from your jam jar in perfect isolation." Hannibal toes at the edge of the rug with a brogue. "I do wish you'd let me buy you an actual bed. An air mattress is not a long term solution."

"It is for me," says Will. "Dogs like it, I like it, everyone likes it. Stay out."

Hannibal appreciates Will's strange attachment to cognac, a relic of their earlier days, and while he buys his own proper glass to use at the cottage, he makes it a point to pour Will's into Will's jam jar glasses when they sit for the evening, taking in the autumn wind from the long balcony porch. There's a Japanese maple at the end these days. (*"Complimentary to your fine carpentry work - long may it reign unbroken by errant guests."*) Two proper lounge chairs appear. Hannibal talks of planting cherry and apple trees on the steep hillside before it gets too late in the year.

They are mismatched, but temporarily settled in some way.

(*A factoid - volcanic eruptions take months to occur, slowly unsettling the bedrock, creeping outward into unknown space. Sometimes it builds something. Other times it flattens the surrounding area. Are you Plinian, Will?*)

The whole thing chafes at him. It's fake, or aspects of it are at least not totally honest. He's certain that Hannibal is waiting for something, and this is just a way for him to pass the time while he waits for something in Will to snap.

"I'm happy here, you know." He says one night, seemingly at random, but he knows the meaning is seen and understood. They have been discussing seabirds who winter on the sea, though Hannibal is wise enough to not bring up albatrosses again. Their inability to land, hunting constantly, always alone save for short windows of time to breed. (*You never quite forgive him his condescending email, though you appreciate stories of the woman that prompted it. You have a weak heart for the elderly and the unusual.*) Instead Will tells him about the glossy black murres and storm petrels that shelter in the bay, and blue mouthed cormorants that shriek on the cliff sides.

"I don't think something is missing," he adds. "I don't feel incomplete. You're always rooting around for some hidden discontent, and I'm happy."

(*Hannibal is here, something inside you thinks. Freddie Lounds is dead. Nobody thinks you kill teenagers in unstable fits, and you haven't been called to look at a crime scene since your time in the hospital. This is as good as it gets for Will Graham, even if you've committed sudden and unrepentant murder, your closest confidante broke the neck of and sliced up a colleague for believing you, and Abigail Hobbes' body has never been found.*)

(*There's clearly something wrong with you, even if you are happy.*)

Hannibal, from his adirondack chair, turns his Glencairn glass in hand, watching the drink inside change colors in the evening light. The sun is peeking from behind the spruce in the front yard, the bridge a ghostly green behemoth disappearing into the night even as the last touches of red and yellow fade from the sunset. He is considering Will, even if he isn't looking at him. He doesn't have to conjure his best face when no one can look at it directly, and these are the times he looks most honest. But even now, he looks as untouchable as

marble, the bust of some Roman lord forever locked in chiseled thoughtfulness. Will prays for that kind of stillness, even as nerves and impatience win out in fidgeting and imagined scenarios.

Hannibal takes a sip, and bites at the edge of his mouth, glancing to Will. “You are comfortable, the same way you were comfortable in Wolf Trap. Simple life, simple routines. Arguably an improvement in that Jack Crawford hasn’t come a’calling, though I can assure you that’s not out of his desire. Your estate planner and lawyer were quite clear in their arguments to the FBI that continuing to contact you would be harassment.”

“Doesn’t seem to have stopped you.”

“I am a different kind of force entirely, and not with the FBI.”

“One could call that harassment, just with a different kind of force.”

Hannibal gives a toothy grin, sighing into his glass. “I’m entirely confident you want my company. You’re just unable to express it without feeling you are giving up a piece on the board. Or a piece of your home, depending on the situation.”

“Yes, how *is* your back after all that heavy lifting? Aren’t you a little old to be trying to powerlift home goods?”

Will has had too much to drink, but in a rare change of pace, Hannibal has been keeping up with him, working their way through a nicer bottle that Will has traditionally kept for visits from Russell. (*When you tell him this, Hannibal smiles unexpectedly wider than is his habit, and gives Russell a jaunty “salút!”.*) He’s warm in his adirondack chair with Buster sidled up next to him like a warm piece of coal, while Hannibal keeps Winston company with absent minded scratches behind his speckled ears. A part of him imagines what it would be like to grab Hannibal’s wrist, hanging limp with a crystal tumbler grasped in long elegant fingers. To feel the tendons and veins there, and know he’s human after all.

When he looks up and Hannibal’s face, he is being watched intensely.

“Penny for your thoughts?” the older man drawls, but it’s as warm as Buster, without any of the usual cleverness, just good humor.

“You should drink more often,” Will says with a half-smile. “You’re less of an asshole.”

“If I took up most of your requests in the spirit of being less of a nuisance to you, I think I would be cast at this point to be some kind of Macbeth figure.”

“Seems fair to me - a little madness and death would even things out. I’m always giving up something when it comes to you,” he confesses. “It’s never simple. It’s always complicated, even if it’s something that should be simple. Letting you in the house after months of avoiding having anyone in the house is a concession. Having you cook dinner, which at this moment in time I have no intention of doing, is a concession. You take a little ground one day, and the next you’re asking for the rest of the peninsula.”

Hannibal shifts his legs, folding them to where the glint of the sun off the shiny top of his shoe is hard to ignore. “Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting, or so I’ve read. Do not mistake that for my intention - it is simply a method of communication I have found helpful when half the party considers themselves at war.”

“Hear me out for once,” Will says with a handwave and a wry look. “I’m not convinced that you aren’t here to trap me into thinking you’re the safest place to be. Example being your obsessive fixation and volume of jokes about that dumb rug - I’m half-convinced it’s going to be my final resting place as some sort of comeuppance for the past weeks of irritation and the empty months before it, and this is all a long con. It would follow your pattern of pointing out the obvious like some kind of portent of doom, and getting to have a good laugh about it later.”

Hannibal begins to talk, but Will shakes his head seriously, continuing. “Is the expensive rough cut tile because you think I should use it to sell the house, or because you like it and want to live with me? Is the kitchen pot filler for your convenience, or because you can’t picture not having one in your design? Is the maple tree on the porch because you disliked the space being empty, or because you want to watch the leaves turn red in the evening when we sit like this?”

Hannibal frowns. “Why can’t it be both?”

“Is that an authentic answer?”

Hannibal shrugs one elegant shoulder, and Will watches, unable to look at anything but the collar of the waxed tartan coat, where the grey of his hair glints like silver threads in red and black. “It is both, if you’re wondering. I have interests and preferences, completely separate from our friendship. Your inability to recognize it despite your vast capacity of understanding is a product of fear.”

“The rug comment seems like a good baseline to understand my concern.”

“Maybe I want to lay you out on the rug in an entirely different way than you imagine. There’s a small bit of yellow ochre in the pattern that I think will flatter your eyes, if you can hold them open for the duration of the planned activities.”

Will snorts, almost aspirating himself on his drink in a burning gulp, and definitely spilling over the edge of the glass.

“Did you leave your professionalism on the east coast, or just your good taste?” Will sneers between a wheezing cough and a twisted grin. “Wait, don’t answer that - we both know you have limited reserves that I seem to be exempt from on both accounts.” Despite the thick sarcasm, he’s horrified to feel the heat in his face as he blushes intensely.

“Yes, you are exempted from more than is reasonable,” says Hannibal. He is still watching predator-still, but smiles slow and satisfied. He drinks the rest of his glass.

Chapter End Notes

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No time like a quarantine for obsessive home improvement reading, right? Be safe, wash your hands, and read fanfic friends!

act 3 - I escape, one way or another

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Going to the whiskey bar becomes something of a tradition on Friday nights when Will is done with work and dinner put away. It's a long walk from the cottage and even from Hannibal's rented flat, but the ritual of sitting across from each other and trading barbed remarks from outside the safety of home feels appropriate.

There's a level of decorum that's expected from each other in public that allows more serious conversations to happen without it devolving into insults on Will's part, or verbal traps on Hannibal's. They should probably work on their communication at some point. Alternatively, Will is also happy to just throw Hannibal off the headland cliffs and probably salt the earth as he goes.

"Are you just never going to return to your practice?," asks Will this evening, favoring a Campbeltown scotch that he has drunk a little too quickly tonight. (*You are getting to be alarmingly acclimated to hard alcohol. Maybe you'll have something to discuss with Beau around Christmas after all.*) "Surely by now your regulars are getting a bit desperate for you to come back from sabbatical. Who's going to mess them up further without you nearby to facilitate social downfalls and mental breakdowns?"

Hannibal is cross-legged and loose limbed tonight, in an exceedingly good mood following confirmation that all of his ridiculous appliance purchases weren't going to burn out the house circuit breaker. Will has spent three days going back and forth with the local power authority on how to make his ancient crapshack of a house work for the modern era. Will is mostly just concerned that he can still use a toaster and the overhead light at the same time without blowing out the entire system. Hannibal is mostly concerned with testing the blast chiller feature in the refrigerator. It's all very domestic.

With his own armagnac, Hannibal smiles, taking a sip. "Contrary to your very limited experience, I have exceptionally good outcomes in the majority of my patients. It just so happens the bad outcomes are spectacularly bad."

"By design?"

“One hopes it’s not by accident.”

“Here’s to failing up,” Will toasts a little bitterly but still with a smile, and Hannibal matches with a toothy grin. “I don’t know if I get to count towards either statistic - I feel like earnest therapy might have had a positive impact, and I don’t know many schools of medical thought that say weekly seizure induction is a healthy way of reexamining and tackling trauma.”

“An outlier as always - I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Hannibal is warmer with Will lately. After their last frank chat on the porch, he challenges Will more and more on what he can get away with when getting close to him, and Will, touch starved and lonely man that he is, only holds ground by merit of thinking Hannibal is playing him for an idiot. It’s hard to know when he’s serious and when he’s playing, because Will is beginning to realize he is *always* playing. Everything is entertaining when you don’t let things like inconvenience and morality get in the way. It’s actually a thing of envy.

“At what point does the normalcy of this go away?” asks Will.

“Do you mean that we become uncomfortable with each other, or that the static nature of our extended stay in Astoria comes to a head?” asks Hannibal, taking another sip. “The first, I surmise it will not happen. By your own perception, I have put you through the worst experiences of your life, and still we are having two fingers of scotch on a Friday, without a care save for your indubitable power to overthink, and whether or not the stone for the bathroom comes intact.”

Hannibal has ordered a ridiculous piece of black and white veined marble to replace the unfortunate square tiles around the raised tub - he fancies he has talked Will into some gothic monstrosity of a soaking tub to replace that as well. He probably has - Will doesn’t particularly care as long as he has a hand-held shower head for washing dogs.

Hannibal takes another sip of his drink, something darker and spicier than his usual selection. His mouth wet when he puts his glass down, which Will fixates on. The bar is particularly dark, but there’s a glint that Will has a hard time focusing away from. “The second option is more complex. There’s a great many entertainments in revisiting old pastimes - for you,

repairing boats. It's the kind of therapy I would recommend for a typical client. Many people take comfort in repeating, monotonous tasks as escapism from stress. Not unlike Buddhist mandalas, being brushed away day after day to start again in meditation. You've always had more stress than most, even separate of our...complications."

"Got it, I'm damaged. Thanks for the quality feedback."

Hannibal turns his head, catching Will's gaze. "Hardly, if you were merely damaged, I wouldn't find you half as interesting as I do. Damage rolls off you, water on a duck's back. You wade into it and out again, present and understanding of it but separate from it. Stained, like shibori, but still made of the same material as before. It's very beautiful."

"Shibori requires manual stitching and the fabric to be pulled and contorted for the dye to develop the pattern. Sounds like it's right down your alley," Will says, observing his emptied glass. "You are very keen to pull people out of shape."

"The linen must be porous to work well with the dye, no matter the stitching and contortion," says Hannibal, all sulphurous and deep and secret as he often is. "You took to the dye exceedingly well. I cannot imagine a more suitable fabric. That is something you were, long before me, and likely long after. I merely suggested a use, which you found of value only once we were separated."

"'Command ye me the works of my hands,' your Benedictines would say."

"Just so. You are your own person," Hannibal says, looking determinedly into his glass. "Even I cannot guess the final design of your weft and weave."

It's an admission worth toasting (*for you*). Will orders refills, and Hannibal is comfortable but quiet for a time.

A tallying of sad kitchenware, in full:

2 soup bowls - in lieu of soup, Will eats granola, rice krispies, and other cereal grains that Hannibal looks at like travesties, especially knowing Will is passing up carefully made pastries and attractive lunches on weekdays in the name of these pedestrian things.

2 and half plates - there's a half, because the third plate is cracked, and a high risk utility item. Will doesn't throw it out since there's still some value in it, but he'd hardly invite someone to eat off of it. (*Even Hannibal, though you do offer it occasionally as a reminder that he's not at liberty to dispose of your things. He seems to take it as a running gag, the same way that he makes continuous and pointed statements at the expense of your bedroom setup.*)

1 skillet and 1 soup pot - it's not like he ever makes anything more elaborate than rice and beans, or maybe a basic canned vegetable sausage stew that his daddy was a big fan of for a stretch of years during high school. It's hard to mess up diced tomatoes, navy beans, onion, and kielbasa, and one round of that feeds him for three or four days of dinner. The skillet isn't often used. He's dreadful at fried eggs, and something about bacon cooking where he can hear it makes him viscerally uncomfortable after the fevers from the encephalitis abated.

A hodgepodge of thrifted silverware - this is something that Beau always did, and Will follows now in Astoria. (*"Ten cents a piece," his daddy says. "Ain't no sense in spendin' money on 'dis kinda t'ing."*) Back in Wolf Trap, something about matching sets and entertaining dishes felt like good old American success. He remembers going to Macy's, contemplating how one best expressed themselves in a place setting. Now it feels contrived. His only complaint in thrifting these is that all the damn spoons are gone when he tries to buy more. The apologetic sales people tell him that they're used for crafting things like bracelets, but Will really just needs something to get the milk out of his bowl with, and their earnest explanations mean he's stuck with the three bent ones he has for yet another week.

A mixing bowl, a glass casserole dish, and a Pyrex measuring cup - even Will occasionally wants to eat box cake straight out of a casserole dish. If no one is looking, he might pour milk over it and eat it like the most foul bachelor dessert that he can conjure in approximately 35 to 40 minutes, depending on which cake mix he uses.

A small handful of cooking utensils - it's hard to flip eggs without a spatula. It's near impossible to dice tomatoes without a knife. It's unpleasant to whisk batter with a fork, even

if you can technically do it and there's probably a primitive French cookbook somewhere that insists on it.

All of these things make Hannibal avoid cooking, despite his very costly additions to the kitchen in hopes of that result, as well as cabinets full of renovation supplies. Will said he could finish the renovation, not buy him a restaurant quality suite of implements or sort his house. Will runs with it. It's nice to have the high ground on this subject, but even he agrees that it might be worthwhile to ease up on the takeout and maybe make a pass at cooking meals in his newly minted and chef appointed digs. It's somewhat illogical to keep avoiding it in the name of hard-headedness.

But Hannibal cooking is still a difficult subject for him. It's the first sin committed against him in their acquaintance. (*You do not consider Cassie Boyle's actual butchering to be one - Hannibal would have made his way back to her someday, with or without Garrett Jacob Hobbs.*) He still can taste savory sage in the eggs, tender sausage made of lung, and little bits of bell pepper. It would have been good with toast. Hannibal probably resented not being able to conjure a homemade sourdough to finish the scene, much like he probably resents not being able to do the same with this new kitchen layout.

But not today, thinks Will. Today's a day for burritos from down the street, made by a very nice lady who remembers he likes extra cheese. She does it not because it's a balanced dish, but because Will likes it, and Will doesn't yet think Hannibal would do the same.

"Shit," Will gasps, hissing.

It's his pet word - he says it for minor inconveniences, major injuries, and occasionally in lieu of an actual response when he is surprised. His father was much the same, cursing his way across apartments, boat cabins, and sidewalks like every instance of pain between there and home is contrived to irritate him. Sometimes the tone is quiet, meant for his benefit. Sometimes it's designed to broadcast distress. Sometimes he's just clobbered a red-headed woman with a wrench to literal death and doesn't really have an alternative appropriate response.

Watching with a remote horror as the medicine cabinet in the bathroom falls off the wall, mirror corner catching the side of his right forearm and leaving a long, deep, wet trail of blood, it is this time said with something of a wheezing breath. The rest of the cabinet falls to the floor to shatter and crash with all the fanfare of a band marching directly through the house.

He really hates this bathroom. He knew he should have focused on the kitchen again.

From the hall to the living room, Will can hear Hannibal's heels clicking on the wood floor with some speed. Winston, having laid down in the hall to watch his work, paces frantically. When Hannibal appears around the corner, he has already started rolling up the sleeves of a crisp seersucker stripes shirt in tidy even segments. (*Force of habit, you think. Surgeon heading to the scene of a disaster, or predator heading to the scene of the hunt. There's the smell of blood either way, and he must answer.*)

"Are you alright?" asks Hannibal, not bothering to look Will in the face but instead surveying the damage. He clearly doesn't expect an honest response. When he sees the arm that Will grips with his left hand, drops of blood coming from beneath, he carefully sidesteps the wreck of glass and pulls Will from the bathroom and into the hall to head to the kitchen.

"Strong pressure, like sealing a leak. Do you feel light-headed, or may I grab something from outside?" Hannibal asks in clipped tones, grasping over the top of Will's hand, steering the heel of Will's palm until satisfied with the placement. Will can't help but think of Abigail, spilling out in another kitchen a lifetime away. Hannibal was calm then too.

"Going to fire up the grill?" Will asks in a daze, breathing between his teeth. He does eventually nod though, feeling sweat and another loud swear bubbling to the surface with nausea.

Hannibal squeezes his wrist once and swiftly goes outside - maybe to his car. With nothing but the counter to support him, Will contemplates looking at the wound, just to marvel at it. The dogs are dancing around his feet, anxiously prodding at his knees with their noses and paws. All this time worrying about what Hannibal was going to do, and it's the house that does him in. How fitting.

(*You never do see it coming.*)

Will actually does swear again when Hannibal comes back up from the downstairs front entry, holding a black duffel that appears to be nothing but medical supplies.

"Jesus, do you really just haul an OR's worth of equipment around on the off chance that you need to relieve someone of a kidney? Can't stand to wait these days, or have you had something specific in mind this week for a while?"

Hannibal only gives Will a blank stare and a half smile, moving quickly. "Having seen the general care that people receive from random emergency rooms in the United States, I've always been of a mind to treat myself if necessary," says Hannibal, getting into a box of bright blue latex gloves and rolls and rolls of gauze. Drywall caulk, miscellaneous tools, and supply receipts are pushed away to open up the expanse of the counter. "Today, it looks like it will be you. May I?" he asks, pulling lightly at the hand sealed over the cut. It's tacky with drying and wet blood alike.

"That'll leave a mark," Will sighs between gritted teeth, this time with more irritation when he lifts his hand away and another gout of blood comes out, trickling on to the white counter. The cut is long and ugly and throbs like being stabbed all over again, obnoxiously red.

"Poignantly articulated," says Hannibal, but he hums with something like satisfaction. "Only superficial, thankfully, judging by the volume of blood. But deep," he uses his fingers to pry at the edges a little, wiping the excess away with squares of gauze. "I can sterilize and close it if you'd like. I promise my only price is that you let me properly clean it, which will likely be at least somewhat uncomfortable."

Will hesitates. Not because there will be pain, but because it's Hannibal, and there's nothing to say he won't dig his fingers in for a closer look.

"I can also help you get to an urgent care if you'd prefer," Hannibal says quietly, turning his wrist back and forth slowly and delicately, picking up on the anxious pause. Surprise, Will thinks - he has some tact after all. "Perhaps I have not yet quite earned your trust when it comes to medical care."

No shit, he thinks. Will still hesitates, looking down at where his skin is a shallow canyon.

Hannibal watches a moment longer, before covering the wound with gauze, and putting a gloved hand to the back of Will's neck. The latex catches on the small hairs there, but Will imagines he can still feel the whorls of Hannibal's fingerprints through the blue rubber, hot as brands. He's very careful, using a thumb to favor a curled strand that falls between the back of Will's ear and the tender hollow of the sternocleidomastoid. (*How clinical a description, for a not at all clinical feeling. How romantic, your poetry of anatomy.*)

"Let me do this for you," he says in solemn tones. "You have every reason you want to say no, but let this be a small thing I can do for you."

(*Let him show you he can mend as well as tear. You can decide later which is the fairer truth.*)

Will nods, swallowing, trying to not lean back into the hand at his neck that is warm in a kinder way than the warmth of an injury. Clumsiness, disgraceful movement, poor manners and language, these are things he can have attributed to himself with no personal concern. But neediness? Not today.

Hannibal nods back, pulling his hand away slowly before resuming his sharp speed. In short order he has needles, suture wire, and an abundance of rolled linen gauze ready while the sink tap runs warm water.

Will's proud of himself when he only swears three more times, once when the water hits the cut, twice when it's sterilized with a brown-red wash of iodine, and once more when Hannibal sets the first stitch.

The stitch doesn't actually hurt - Hannibal is as careful with this as he is with spinning sugar floss or hand-lettering an invitation. Will finds himself both happily and unhappily reminded that Hannibal was considered an excellent surgeon. He thinks on the no doubt dozens of people that have been seen by his crueler hand since his days in the operating theatre - did they not feel the string pull through even with the knowledge of his oncoming wrath? Does Hannibal bother with sterilizing cuts that he makes himself, or is it about preserving as much as possible before the man is ready to move forward with his own acts of unrighteous violence?

(*Does it matter as long as he is careful now with you? Are there more acts of unrighteous violence waiting for Will Graham? Do you have your own in turn?*)

“Shit,” Will says with a sigh, looking away.

Will finds himself staring at the ceiling of the bedroom again in the middle of the night. He’s not sick, but he’s certainly tired, and the chill from the floor is coming up through his inflatable mattress as though the humidity had taken it as a personal challenge to make his back ache. He’s created a rat’s nest of the thrifted blankets, and the dogs have joined forces to warm themselves, while Will throws one socked foot off the edge of the plastic to freeze by itself. (*Force of habit from since you were a child - it’s rather like leaving a strategic vulnerability, bait, like the monsters under your bed are predictable and easily lured.*)

In the static dark, he blinks and swallows, and feels his tangling hair pull at the skin of his neck like the latex gloves. His bandaged forearm aches, but is also hot with awareness of pain and past softness. Each stitch of nylon suture wire embraces each other, exposed after Will takes the gauze off for the night to let the injury breathe. Likely against medical advice, but Hannibal’s not here to complain. If he sits still enough, he can still feel Hannibal pulling the needle through the split skin with a tickling smoothness - almost unnoticeable. Will is hugely embarrassed, even from the privacy of his bedroom, to admit the phantom sensation is arousing, and that the cold air is not doing enough to correct this.

Sexual orientation, thy name is ‘largely typical adult white male’ up until this point.

Things passing this point, well, that’s a different identity that Will hasn’t been brave enough to critically examine following Hannibal’s rug comment, and the gentle tugging of surgical needles and fingers prying his wound. (*Just* great - *pleasure from pain, a wire you had hoped to* ***not*** *cross with the rest of your bad circuitry* .)

Is Hannibal just being provocative, casually suggesting that they’re going to hook up in his living room to complete the aesthetic of the room? Does he actually enjoy pulling Will’s hair out of his face at the drop of a hat, gripping his arms and shoulders to direct him when simple words would have been enough? Stitching him together with the sweetness of gentle hands? Or is Hannibal just joking to get a rise out of Will? (*He does that - says things to disrupt you,*

to see you explode and see how the debris falls. Ever the scholar, and you, ever the experiment.) Will is brave enough to face that he feels flattered by the attention, but suspicious as a beaten dog about the intention.

It feels forbidden, thinking of Hannibal that way, much less with the needles, sutures, and the history of injuries and medical malpractice, and all the other miscellaneous bullshit that comes attached. Not because he lacks sensuality, or that Will doesn't think he's an attractive man - he's most certainly that, even if a bit atypical in plumage and behavior. His face is very classical, his physicality very sturdy and maintained, and it would surprise Will to meet someone smoother than him with a compliment or a gracious comment. He dresses sharp and takes care to only show his best appearance. Never cross with people. Never cruel without very careful, exacting purpose. It's how he ingratiates himself to others, but it's also something that Will perceives as being natural to him. Even unmasked, he doesn't think it's in Hannibal's nature to be unkind for the sake of unkindness - where would the fun in that be, when what he values is noblesse and ritual?

More so Will struggles with this concept because sexual attraction is fairly abstract to him as an individual - he experiences it with an academic interest. He never thinks to feel out the edges.

(*You usually can't get out of your head long enough to get laid. When you do, you can't get out of the other person's mind long enough to enjoy getting laid enough to practice getting out of your head more regularly. Rinse, repeat.*)

Raised in the rural South and blue-collar neighborhoods of the eastern States, Will hasn't had much cause to question his typical attraction to women. Being attracted to women was normal, and in a world that he had very little normalcy, this was a pleasant place to feel secure. Women have beautiful faces, delicate but practical frames, soft hands, often a desire to encourage his obsessive, subservient habits which are flattering, and occasionally a hesitancy to cast off his social connection because he evokes the same need to swaddle and defend that only broken people and children seem to bring to the surface, which is not flattering at all. (*This part you hate - this part is why you so often are single.*)

Alana hits all these high and low points in his time in Virginia, working at Quantico. She's smart, attractive, has a good sense of humor about Will's very caustic responses to most things, and she likes dogs. Most people like dogs, but most people don't work with him and have all these other things too. If Will is honest, there's not much that extends beyond that. They are friendly, but hardly exhibiting a star-crossed romance. The 'will they, won't they' themes start to grate after year two. The 'starting a relationship with your psychiatrist while

you are in prison' is a turn-off in the understatement of the century. After all, she can't be alone in the same room as him, and doesn't that make his cheeks burn with something other than love.

Hannibal, removed of the cannibalism and the night-time destructive tendencies *(as though these are small inconveniences and not **massive** Leningrad sized red flags*), exhibits a lot of these same characteristics. He's unbearably intelligent, debonair, and thinks all of Will's prickly disposition is worth listening to and actively commenting towards. He seems to find Will attractive objectively, questionably sexually if he's not just pulling Will's leg. It's unclear if he likes dogs. In any case, the dogs like him, which is all Will needs to know that both the dogs and Will himself have terrible taste.

How much of an admission is that to make out loud, that he likes Hannibal? Not much of one at all, really - that's the part that's always hurt the most. He used to hide that he liked Hannibal. It had to be unspoken - enjoying the attention of a mental health specialist was not an option. There was too much at stake if he said the wrong thing.

The man walked into his hotel room with all the confidence of a hurricane, and Will let it happen, because he enjoys being challenged without having to explain himself constantly. Hannibal convinces him to eat dinners with names he doesn't know, talk about things he's been afraid to pull out of his mental toy box for years, and honestly consider the possibility of being mentally ill after years and years of denial, because why wouldn't he have trusted Hannibal? The image he held of him for so long was one of a pillar, when he was secretly a thunderstorm, igniting the underbrush with lightning strikes. Hannibal Lecter, an avatar of things Will wanted out of people, uncannily available every time he needs something.

He wasn't that last time, obviously. Quite the opposite.

That's why it will hurt if this is another lie. Will's not sure if he can get out of his head enough this time either, not to enjoy himself, but instead to protect. (*Your mind is your most valuable commodity - why else would Hannibal constantly be trying to see more of it, like he could pick up your thoughts like pouring water through a sieve and catching all the worst things you've wrought in the mesh?*)

He picks at the stitches, and tries to not think about his cold foot and sore back. Rain falls quietly outside, and Will thinks about what it would actually be like to not be alone at night. Intellectually, of course.

Will doesn't leave the stitches alone, as bad as one of the dogs worrying at a hot spot. By morning, the wound is swollen and burning. When he walks out and meets Hannibal for coffee at the usual street corner, Hannibal insists on seeing how it's healing.

"It's fine," Will insists. (*It's really not.*)

"As the medical professional, I'd like to confirm that for myself. Let's call it for my peace of mind, if it bothers you to admit to weakness."

"Right, you being the authority in timely medical intervention," Will sighs, and rolls up a work shirt sleeve in a huff. He tries to not make eye contact with either Hannibal or the tidy line of stitches that look like pen marks on his reddened skin.

There's no smug comments or jokes. Hannibal's only response is to make a noise of discontent and pull alcohol swabs from his pocket to clean it. Will experiences a rather surreal moment, watching Hannibal close the yellow umbrella and hang it by its handle from his arm, and rip open the swab in the middle of the neighborhood, oddly coordinated with the crosswalk and jewel-bright streetlights down the way with his scarf. Hannibal delicately examines the vertical mattress stitches, perfect yesterday, distended and ugly today. He's exceedingly ginger cleaning them to prevent more of a sting than is inevitable.

Will blushes at this too - the subservience and careful touches from Hannibal, and the foolishness on his part. He practically jumps onto the boat in his haste to get away, motoring out and letting the sea air clear his face and redden his cheeks for different reasons.

It's not exactly a big secret that Will works for Frank. His schedule on a weekday, even with Hannibal around and (*still*) insistent on walking with him in the mornings, is as regimented as a military.

He leaves the dock on Daisy at approximately 8:00am, allowing a generous hour of travel time between the Astoria downtown area to the dockside of the shop on the outskirts of Warrenton. He passes the port into the open waters of the Columbia and Youngs rivers, under the bay bridge, and idles with the gulls, shearwaters, and murrelets that bob on the smooth water surface during the morning mist. He's started thinking of it as his support group - they are also carnivores masquerading around in sea towns, who will happily eat and drink trash as long as they don't have to share it. It makes a great place to ditch Hannibal's occasionally proffered lunches without feeling like it's a total waste.

In the event that Hannibal has found some oblivious soul to convert into beef wellington or whatever other protein du jour he's inspired by this week, Will is unbothered giving it to the gulls - there's something about animals eating humans that is justice, whereas Hannibal doing it is a long-running gag. At least Garrett Jacob Hobbs had the humility to imbue reverence - he eats other people's children out of a need to preserve his own.

(*You suspect there was at least one meal that wasn't a joke that kicks off the whole sordid tradition for Hannibal. You're not brave enough to ask about it. Not because you're afraid of his reaction, but how it'll colour your own to his.*)

If he arrives early to work, it's of no consequence. He might smoke some more outside the office while Scow looks out the office window like an ill-tempered ginger spectre, speaking his displeasure at not being let out. Frank, a man with a habit of leaving important papers in discarded stacks, forgetting to respond to letters and email, and frequently late from his own rough nights at home, is religious about making sure the cat is secured every night before they leave. Will suspects this is why he likes Frank - Frank is him, just as a cat person.

Today, two days removed from his medicine cabinet disaster, Will takes extra time after passing under the bridge to drink his coffee in relative silence, with just the water and the mewing of the gulls to distract him. It's the most distance he can get from people most days. Maybe he'll move out into the woods one of these days, on the Washington side where there's *really* no one to bother him. Invite Beau out to fish, stop cutting his hair and his beard entirely, build a cabin, become Jeremiah Johnson, and truly live a fervent childhood dream. (*And some folks say, 'he's still up there.' You can't think of a more preferable final line to your story* .)

When he arrives, both Frank and Lori haven't appeared yet, though Scow makes some discontented noises from the window facing the docks. All Will sees is the twitching of his

big, bushy tail. More time to himself is hardly a burden. Tieing up Daisy and lighting up a cigarette, he closes his eyes, and listens to the distant traffic from the road, and the water lapping at the shore and the sides of his boat. He drifts out over the bay, peaceful - his new stream to wade into.

"I had thought I smelled nicotine on you a few times, but I assumed it was a co-worker. You must not have kept the habit up at the house, just on the way out here."

God dammit.

"Hannibal," Will says, turning around slowly, holding his cigarette between his fingers making irritated flicks with his thumb to scatter the ash. He half hopes when he turns around that Hannibal is going to be Freddie - just a figment of his imagination, but no, sure enough, there he is.

Will sighs. "I'm not gonna waste my time asking how you got out here, and instead stick to the actual question - **why** are you here?"

"You forgot something," says Hannibal, looking very cozy in a black sweater and blazer, black slacks, and practical lace-up hiking boots, car keys in hand and a matching leather briefcase bag slung over one shoulder. He looks like he's going to work - Will supposes he did mention telecommuting with some clients.

Will gives him a moment to elucidate. In typical Doctor Hannibal Lecter fashion, he doesn't. It's apparently Will's job to divine what he's talking about.

"Are you going to tell me what it is, or are you just here to snoop? I've got an overweight 20 pound cat I can introduce you to, but not much else to see at this point."

(*What have you forgotten?*)

Hannibal smiles. “It wasn’t out of my way to stop by. I have a call with a patient this morning and was heading into Cannon Beach for the appointment and to have my own time away from the house,” he says, shifting his bag to the other shoulder. “I’m very fond of the state park there, and the occasional walk in the woods does wonders for clearing one’s mind.”

“Better coffee helps, I assume,” says Will.

Will takes another drag of his cigarette, searching Hannibal’s face and his memory. He runs over the routine. His dogs - walked. The front door - locked. (Hannibal would fix this if he didn’t do it anyway - he has a fucking key.) His physical person - washed. (*You forget a lot of basic personal maintenance things that healthy people do, but pretty much never this.*) Breakfast - skipped, but Hannibal’s always trying to feed him in the morning that it’s almost perverse that he keeps throwing it out, so what did he not do -

Hannibal reaches into the inner pocket of his blazer.

(*Did you take your meds?*)

Will is grounded by the chilly sea air and the knowledge he is at the shop, but he feels like he’s dropped down through the dock into the cold water, downward into the mud and silt and the riptide of the bay. Did Hannibal find the bottle? Does Hannibal look at his medication when he’s gone for the day? Are they legitimately the same pills? Is this a new way to turn him upside down, and not know which way to surface?

Hannibal holds up his wallet, a humble brown leather billfold that he’s had since college, and throws it at him playfully.

Will can’t believe he forgot it, even as he reaches back into the pockets of his jeans, and feels the absence. He could swear he had it when he left the house.

“You wouldn’t want to be without this - I’m no sailor, but identification and insurance seems like something you’d want.”

“At least to correctly tag my body,” Will says with grave tones, trying to fight a relieved smile. He’s almost sick with the rush of anxiety disappearing like a retreating wave, just his heart rate and tight chest as evidence of it, like little bubbles in the sand and the inky stain of water to show it had ever been there. He hopes it doesn’t show in his face too much. “Thank you.”

Hannibal leaves just as Lori is rolling up in her own beat-up Camaro, watching with tired eyes as the Range Rover pulls out of the gravel parking lot and heads down the road. She’s wearing coral pink lipstick today, and takes Will’s cigarette from his hand to finish the rest of it with not so much as a good morning.

“Who’s that tall drink? That friend of yours that you’ve been working on the house with?”

“Sometimes,” Will says, pocketing his wallet.

Will gets home around the usual time, though Hannibal sends an apologetic text explaining that he’ll be out a while longer. He’s run into Portland after his morning call and hike to collect some documents he’s had shipped to an attorney in the city that have to be recorded and notarized. It all sounds very dull and clerical to Will, to which Will says fuck that, relieved to not have to deal with that himself anymore. Hannibal offers to bring something back for dinner, though he doesn’t restrain a tone of facetious hospitality at the idea of Will preferring something cooked by a college-aged person in the Buckman area with a taste for candied bacon.

So an evening mostly to himself - what an unexpected treat. After this morning’s scare, he takes it as a sign to keep off the booze, take his pills, and eat something he would normally get a mournful look from Hannibal for eating, as though he pulled it directly from the trash. He’s so proud of his cooking, Will imagines it actually does physically pain him to watch Will eat a takeaway French Melt with soggy onion rings.

When he goes into the basement, everything looks as it should be. On the ceiling beam, the greyhound pin winks from the shadows, and the little innocuous brown pill bottle of antipsychotics is facing the way he left it, undisturbed. Will knows this is reasonable - even Hannibal would feel stupid checking every nook and cranny for something this basic.

Will counts the pills, for anxiety's sake. All the colors, shapes, and imprints match with what he knows it should be, so no modifications, and no changes in the strength. However, there *is* one dose too many.

He didn't take them after all, but when is the question. Was it today, or several days ago? If he's forgotten and couldn't identify it being today, there's no saying that Hannibal is involved at all. He can't decide if Occam's Razor says Hannibal only knew about one forgotten thing, or both. Entities shouldn't be multiplied without necessity after all.

Will resolves to sit on it, but sets a reminder on his phone and a new hiding place for both the pin and the pills. Beneath a loose floorboard in his bedroom that a pile of books currently holds in place seems as good as any.

Will is sawing a new frame for his workshop cabinets. He's gotten tired of moving the detritus of construction from one room to another, hiding the proliferation of paint cans and sample tiles in closets, the spare bedroom, and inside the kitchen cabinets. Hannibal distinctly is unamused by this, but Will takes great pleasure in pointing out that it's not like he had kitchenware to begin with, and the various swatches and samples are his fault anyway.

If Will were fully in charge of this renovation, there'd probably be a plain jane white ceramic on pretty much every surface that demanded it, unless the nice girl from Home Depot wants to talk him into something else trendy.

So instead they are in the basement this evening - Hannibal thumbing through a small second-hand volume of James Joyce that has traveled from his bedside to the spare room to the kitchen over the last week. The loud searing drone of the table saw throws wood chips and ringing pain into his ears. Ear plugs are for smarter men, who remember to buy them.

Hannibal is, in this case, a smarter man.

Will is cautiously interested in what Hannibal will do when allowed to return to his favorite pastime with an audience that knows why he developed the skill. It's not that Will thinks of it

as setting up a sinner to return to his favorite vice, as much as he does of watching a wild animal in its native habitat. An immediate transgression would be easier for Will to compartmentalize, and write Hannibal off with finally. *Oh, he's an innately hateful creature* , he'll think, at first bite of some sloppy grocery bagger's thigh, or marinated sashimi made of cheek from the mouthy teller at the bank. *He was never going to stop. I'm right, I'm right, I'm always right.*

Instead, he's constantly barraged by thoughts that he can change. Hannibal, his friend that made him coffee at 4 am like it was nothing, who tagged along for late night crime scenes with good humor that pulls Will out of his worst moods. Hannibal, who goes for early morning walks so Will doesn't have to spend his whole morning alone, and subjects himself to small indignities in food, company, and pointed comments because for reasons beyond Will's understanding, he gets a kick out of it even without the encephalitis and the Faustian attempts to get him to go out and dole out some Old Testament justice. Hannibal, who is wearing ear plugs in the basement, to stay in each other's presence for a little while longer.

Alternatively, maybe it's never been about nature or nurture, and that Hannibal is just some kind of predestined monster with constant traits. Maybe he's always just chosen to dole out love and hurt in complimentary doses, because it pleases him to do so. Will pleases him right now, and it pleases Will for him to be docile, so Will lives, and Hannibal muzzles himself.

He knows which is more likely, but it doesn't stop him from going through the equations. He wants to be prepared, no matter the outcome.

"Hannibal," Will says, lifting the saw from the lumber in front of him. His ears are ringing.

Hannibal says nothing, but is listening, flipping through pages at a reading pace that has more in common with a Xerox than standard human comprehension, pulling an ear plug out. His eyebrows are raised, such a small thing that Will knows to mean he is focused elsewhere from what's in front of him.

"If you make me regret letting you into my kitchen, I swear to god I will burn this house down with you and everything else in it."

Hannibal watches him for a moment, strange bronze colored eyes unblinking. He smiles, wider than his usual preference. He closes the book, sharp and loud in the absence of the saw

motor.

“The day of the Lord will come as a robber comes,” quotes Hannibal. “The heavens will pass away with a loud noise. The sun and moon and stars will burn up. The earth and all that is in it will be burned up. Feeling biblical, Will? I didn’t take you for a scholar of the epistles.”

Will checks the angle of his cut and the grain for burrs. It’s smooth.

“‘Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, you should think about the kind of life you are living,’” quotes Will. “I’m not playing any games here. You’re the one that reengaged me. Be sure you know why you did it.”

Hannibal continues watching him for a moment, before biting the corner of his mouth and licking his lips. “Your apostle of choice is apt. Saint Peter was said to hold the first in honor and authority after Christ,” says Hannibal. “I would have that for you and more, if you wish it.”

“Are you Christ in this analogy, or just offering honor and authority?” he says with a laugh, picking up another plank to cut. “I’m simply asking you to keep things kosher, so we’re not both wasting our time on this,” Will adds, putting down the framing piece. “I should have all the crap in the kitchen out of your way by next week. Decide what that means, and I’ll decide what I feel about that.”

Hannibal leaves for the night, looking much the same as he always does, but with a vigor going down the street that Will’s not sure he just imagines or if Hannibal always power walks home like he can’t wait to go to sleep.

Hannibal invites him to Portland.

“No,” says Will, on the Wednesday preceding the Saturday excursion.

“Well then,” says Hannibal, hands raised. “I guess that’s that.”

It’s not just “that.”

“How much do you know about Russian food?” says Hannibal.

“Nothing. I don’t care if the entire country has personally delivered every vodka and potato they own with a personal missive to me. I don’t even like vodka. I’m not going to Portland,” says Will on the Thursday preceding the Saturday excursion.

Friday afternoon, Will attempts to drive to Seaside to pick up an order for a new flue pipe for the water heater, only to find that the starter on his car has gone bad. It’s been about a week since his last time needing to drive himself anywhere, the battery tests out low, and the battery cables look pretty damn pitiful and probably could use replacing, courtesy of salt water air, and generally being an old, frustrating project car.

The nearest place he can buy the replacement is in Portland from the dealership.

(*For half a second you think Hannibal has something to do with this, like he’s personally responsible for poisoning the crops, scattering wild game, and has intimate knowledge of what parts of the car are proprietary and hard to fix. In reality, you just haven’t been using the car all that much, and it’s way more likely he has absolutely nothing to do with it.*)

Will sighs.

“What time did you want to go to Portland?” Will asks waspishly, on the Friday night preceding the Saturday excursion. Hannibal spends the rest of the night talking about picking up a rare book at Powell’s, something about a Russian market, and whether or not Will is allergic to walnuts and if he’s comfortable with large quantities of aspic in his appetizers.

Chapter End Notes

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In which everybody uses their words, but not the right ones.
You made it another week, despite global disaster! Everybody still in one piece? Thanks for waiting and enjoy.

act 3 - no more walls

Chapter Notes

This chapter is really long, y'all. Grab a drink or something.

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Nothing really sets him off Saturday morning, other than the sound of his phone receiving a text message. Several, really. It rattles across the hardwood floor of the bedroom, sliding around unimpeded from its solitary wall where it's been plugged in to charge. Normally this doesn't bother him, but as each one keeps coming in intervals that make the sound regrettably persistent. As a man who receives almost no human contact on principle, this is unusual phenomena.

Staring at the ceiling, flexing the chill out of his feet, Will doesn't wake with a start, but he certainly does wake when the buzzing gets to him. He has a strange anticipation at the idea of leaving Astoria, and a stranger feeling still about spending an entire day with Hannibal without a backbone of crime scenes, therapy sessions, philosophy over who's *really* the bad person between the two of them, and whether or not Hannibal is allowed to paint the hallway between the ground-level stair entry to the kitchen black.

(*On the other hand, you hope that doesn't make up the backbone of the day. It sounds terrible. You can't imagine how you used to live your life like that.*)

With the sun only beginning to light the grey marine sky, Will groans. To his side, Buster stretches out, tail thumping excitedly against the mattress. Winston merely looks at him mournfully unwilling to get out of the tangle of linens he's comfortable in.

"What's good enough for me is good enough for you," Will says mutinously, sliding out of his warm spot to grab the offending phone. Winston still doesn't stir despite the threat,

though he does watch Will suspiciously. Both dogs are profoundly food motivated - he must be watched to ensure they know every instance of him entering the kitchen.

All of Will's friends are food-motivated it seems, he thinks with a twisted half smile. Hannibal texts in starts and stops about coffee here, or coffee in the city, and what the weather is like today. Will just rolls his eyes and prepares for another frigid dip in the shower.

When Hannibal rolls up in the Land Rover, Will has done his best to dress for the occasion - the occasion being picking up car parts and being dragged across the city until Hannibal is satisfied with the time spent in whatever capacity he has in mind. He's doing Will a favor, so the least he can do is resign himself to his fate and not look like a time-lost sasquatch. This equals a clean pair of jeans, his grandfather's flannel, a red scarf, his waxed canvas rain jacket, and making sure his hair is not a disaster. In a rare concession to the company he keeps, he does oil his beard to keep it smoothed out of the way and a degree less appropriate for an action film than he's been rolling with this week.

Hannibal has clearly interpreted this prompt somewhat differently, with a collared shirt, Pendleton sweater, and long black trenchcoat to go with his tall boots. He looks ready to ascend a tech company mega fortress, though Will supposes that goes hand in hand with fancy coffee and Powell's Books. He looks only mildly resigned to Will looking the same as he does anytime he's not in his oily work clothes, but does look at his face for some time when Will hops into the passenger's seat.

"I still can't decide if the pointed ducktail beard suits you or if you look like part of a production of Don Giovanni," he finally says when they pull up to the first street light, house disappearing around the corner. "It's very striking either way."

"Sounds more like your kind of thing - good looking libertine fights and fucks his way through life despite everyone's best efforts to stop him, gets literally dragged to hell by a vengeful statue. Everyone is suddenly allowed to go out to dinner again. The end."

"You often surprise me with the things you do recognize, despite protestations of not enjoying opera." Hannibal flexes his hands against the steering wheel, an amused sigh

following. “I guess it would be more appropriate for me, wouldn’t it? I’ve hardly stopped you from going out to dinner, though,” he says with an ever widening smile.

“You've had to make some compromises, otherwise you’d have to eat what I make, and then you’d really be sorry.”

“I’ve not had many opportunities to create a sexual catalog of conquests at the moment either, despite what you may think with Alana. If it comforts you at all, I entirely failed to sleep with Jack or your father, or any other coworkers, so that should be a relief.”

“God, what a horrifying thought,” Will grumbles into a cup of coffee, proferred soundlessly as Hannibal drives with one hand. “Sleeping with my literal and theoretical father figures in addition to my one-time romantic interest to establish dominance would be a wild paper to write about though.”

“I think the conclusion would be that I clearly was living vicariously through your associates in the absence of the original article.”

Will, flustered, tells him to shut up and drive with both hands.

The morning starts pretty productively. In a rare turn of fate, the Volvo dealership is actually pretty close to the downtown core and near Forest Park in a renovated department store that would be very at home in a Christmas commercial with all its vintage cars, green exterior, and friendly signage directing him to the service department. He’s wisely ordered ahead and only needs to pick it up.

Hannibal offers to accompany him, but Will opts to stretch his legs alone in the reception area and mentally reset before the rest of the day. While the clerk runs to grab his order, he watches covertly through the windows at Hannibal, leaning against the Land Rover and talking on the phone with someone. He has his polite business face on, so Will thinks nothing of it.

In and out in less than 10 minutes, he can't find much reason to be frustrated with needing to make the visit at all, but fortunes change quickly like the weather.

By lunchtime, it starts to feel like there's not a normal street in the whole of Portland. As a driver, this would make Will spectacularly cross with the entire trip. As a passenger, it's worse watching wrong turns and bad signage pass by and make for another redirect chiming from Hannibal's sleek gold-toned smartphone. There are too many bridges, one-way streets, mystery u-turns, diagonals, and unexpected pedestrians jaywalking for Will to even keep a count of the city's offences by the time they find a parking garage and make their way close to Powell's Books and stop for coffee and lunch.

Will doesn't quite understand why it had to be this way. It wasn't that far from the dealership, but Hannibal makes a circuitous route through the neighboring hills on the premise of checking out the old manor at the top of the treeline, where (*predictably*) nary a view of Mount Hood or Mount St. Helens can be seen. It's autumn - of course no one can see them.

The previously mentioned Russian market also makes an appearance where Hannibal speaks at length between English and Russian about the types of cherries they have for dumplings, and cured salo. The proprietor, a pleasant looking older woman with gnarled hands, seems pleased with his questions. Will in turn feels like an interloper, glancing over a combination of cyrillic, local farm products, and a number of tongue-in-cheek communist propaganda posters.

They leave with a great many condiments that Will can appreciate are things that Hannibal can't just magically make from scratch. Will asks if they can give him shots of vodka to go, and Hannibal, in Russian, tells the shopkeeper presumably that Will is an idiot and thanks her for her time. She laughs, but pours three on the shop counter for him as long as they promise to drink it there. (*You do. She does. Hannibal makes a face, but eventually follows suit when the shopkeeper eggs him on.*)

When they stop for coffee, Will is temporarily reminded of the first shop he goes to after getting out of prison. Everything is clean lines, old storehouse, and jaunty fonts that are playful and serious alike. Despite moving to the heart of the hipster food movement, Will hasn't really acclimated to the easy expectation of fancy toast, vegan treats, and energy shots offered with each espresso and turmeric laden latte, watching young people with the curiousness of a foreign explorer. He doesn't frequent their spaces, feeling too old and

sometimes too removed from the idea of spending money on nice things. The longer he stays a mechanic, the more he feels at home with the things he grew up with.

He's seen their type all across the States, the bourgeoisie treats and the hip young people alike, and while the aspirations skew towards pretentiousness sometimes, he's started appreciating it for what it is - some strange post modern folk movement for a generation growing up with homogenized American culture. It doesn't bother him quite the same way it bothers Frank or Lori, even if he does feel a little strange surrounded by it. (*Or even Hannibal who thinks Americans create hollow shells of beauty and culture with it - you are an American boy at heart made up of other people's values, so you ask him what does that mean. He deflects, saying you aren't the same at all, like his saying so grants exemption.*)

Will doesn't know if he's ready to embrace it, watching steam rise from his no doubt artisanal hand-made mug and a pink haired barista share a laugh with her buccaneer-looking coworker. The mug warms his hand - it's half glazed black, like it's been sitting in oil.

"You'll be displeased to hear I have a dinner reservation for the two of us," Hannibal says blithely over his espresso and sparkling water, churning the crema on top with not fidgeting hands per se, but definitely ones looking for an outlet. (*Listening to you complain for the better part of three hours is probably not the reason - while you are complaining about slow vehicles in the fast lane, parking meters, poor urban planning, and if it should be technically legal to hit pedestrians that use right of way like a blunt force instrument, Hannibal merely smiles. You've probably personally delayed the deaths of half the walking population of Portland by merit of being nervously chatty all morning.*)

"Was that planned several days ago in spite of my initial refusal, or do I have the rare pleasure of a spontaneous decision?"

"Spontaneous - I had cancelled my own personal reservation yesterday when hearing you would be joining me, but they called earlier to let me know we could both be accommodated thanks to a changed guest count. Believe it or not, I was fully prepared to go solo." Hannibal takes a sip of the espresso, appreciative of the taste and small curls of steam coming from it in the yellow lights of the shop. "The restaurant was recommended to me by a colleague at the college hospital -not an exclusive venue, but certainly limited in seating and allegedly to my preparation standards. Nothing fancy, or that you'd be opposed to."

“None of those things sound like they gel together." (*Like the two of you, and yet you do.*) Will sighs, taking his own coffee in hand with a sigh and a long gulp. “I didn’t exactly dress for a reservations-only dinner.”

“Judging from what I’ve seen of Portland,” Hannibal says with good humor and a gesture to the bulk of the room, “I think you will be quite at home.” A dozen or so people in flannels, knitted hats, and varying shades of clean denim are rank and file along the plywood and chrome tables, fancy tablets in hand, big beards in varying states of tidiness. If any of them said they owned a crap shack for a house and liked bird watching, he'd believe them.

Will laughs, just one incredulous bark, and eats avocado toast with pickled carrots and arugula as one does with the locals. He pretends he’s younger than he is, what it would be like to work for a software company, or if he restored antique furniture to sell in minimalist store fronts. He’s in a normal relationship, with a domestic partner, and they’re sight-seeing in affectionately disagreeable companionship on a Saturday between pet projects. Whatever young hip people do. It’s a nice thought - divorced of context, it could be true.

The soul of Hannibal’s trip is still rooted in the book store. Powell’s is a joke of a joke even to people not familiar with the area, but Will can’t deny the volume of books, both standard, unusual, and rare is admirable. The brick building with its fairly generic sign doesn’t inspire the kind of awe that he had made assumptions about, but his tune changes when they go inside. Three floors of catastrophic bibliophilia, technicolored with book spines, yard creations, and the occasional poster trying to direct the heinous volumes of foot traffic. He’s a bit wary of the various promotional items and kitschy souvenirs, but he’s hardly going to give a store a hard time for making the best of its prolific tourist potential.

Besides, it does his heart good to see Hannibal die inside when he shows him a pair of socks that have dogs barking “Fuck Off” all over them. Will would buy them if he didn’t fully realize it would be out of some high school level of spite, but he certainly wonders if the sixteen dollars wouldn’t be spent well there.

Will wanders for a while in the non-fiction, pulling up books on local geology, birds, anything more technical than his personal observations of the coast. It's quiet in this corner, tall windows looking out over the street below. He likes it the way he likes the library. Spines and spines of authors with the kind of detail-driven love towards native plants that Will has

had towards flesh-eating beetles is a nice window into other people's obsessions. There's a stool in the corner. He parks himself there for half an hour before he feels Hannibal return, tapping him lightly on the shoulder blade above the heart.

"My appointment for the rare books room is now - would you care to join me?" he asks, and Will nods, closing a trail guide with the base-drum snap of a heavy tome.

As it turns out, Hannibal is not simply carousing, but has a particular book in mind.

"A first edition Rockwell Kent version of Moby Dick," Hannibal says, like it's entirely obvious. But even Will has to appreciate the stark cover and crinkling paper of the dust jacket, menacing whale breaching the warm white of the paper like he's meant to be there. "Astoria has a rather distinctive history and feel to it that made me think of this, and more so of you. You've read it, I assume," he says with an offhanded gesture, handing it back to a white gloved clerk who looks both nervous and pleased with Hannibal's attention paid to not creasing the pages.

"Of course," says Will. "You might find it hard to believe, but Daddy is a bit of a literature buff, as long as it's from his native soil."

"He has a very distinctive cadence that is both rural and clever. Herman Melville sounds like his kind of author, and you are his kind of son."

"I can't tell if that's a nice way of saying that we sound like well-read hicks, or that we're just well-read," says Will, pocketing his hands and following Hannibal.

"It's a nice way of saying you share a characteristic delight in judgment," says Hannibal, looking to Will with another smile and easy casualness with his hands in his pockets and his eyes turning to a book display. "'Talk not to me of blasphemy, man,'" he quotes, gesturing to his book on the sales counter. "'I'd strike the sun if it insulted me.'"

Will resembles the mark, and he is nettled, long after the clerk tenderly wraps Hannibal's purchase in rice paper and tapes it off with a jaunty satisfaction before it's wrapped again in cardboard and the anonymity of printed package paper.

Will wants to hate the restaurant.

Well, hate is a strong word, but it is alien, and makes him uncomfortable in a different way from the coffee shop. It's not really the interior or the people - the staff are nice people who are simply performing another night of dinner service with clean white shirts, rough bearded faces that usually promise good food here in Oregon (*both high-end and grease bucket in your experience*), and smiles that speak to ease with people. The restaurant's decor is an understated row of bar seating with wood counters and black leather-topped stools, views into the kitchen space, and some bold but neutral toned wallpaper giving a little bit of that granny chic he's beginning to realize is an actual thing that people like, as if they've merely been waiting for a Great Aunt's parlor choices to come full circle. Still, it's tidy and unfussy, just like the proprietors and even most of the guests. It wouldn't necessarily be out of place in Astoria, though maybe a little too urbane for the locals.

He sits next to Hannibal, and sees the tasting menu printed on an eggshell white paper, and the actual draw to the place for his upper-crust companion becomes clear to Will very quickly. It only lists the ingredients, not the preparation, with unusual herbs and additions that make Will feel out of his depth.

It's done nothing to offend him, other than remind him that Hannibal's tastes don't actually skew that close to his. After weeks of pretending at a mutualism there, the reminder comes like a sack of potatoes to the face. (*You would describe it more elegantly, but you're not feeling a very elegant emotion.*)

At least there's wine.

Hannibal must read the anxiety in his face, smiling with his usual feline grace, and unrolling a soft linen napkin before methodically folding it in half. A server swings by with an aperitif glass for each of them - a Kir cocktail that is berry bright and acidic. Hannibal grabs his, tipping his glass slightly towards Will.

Will follows suit, downs the whole thing awkwardly, and sighs heavily when the drink is gone. “Nothing fancy, you said,” Will grumbles. “Nothing you’d be opposed to, you said.”

Hannibal rolls a shoulder. “This is hardly a white glove affair here, though I am told the plating can be very delicate. Indulge me - think of it as a return to my life, since you are repeatedly concerned I am missing it. I am content for it to only be for an hour or two.”

“I thought you would want to do this yourself when the kitchen was done,” says Will, watching with a skeptical glance as the first plate comes out, and confirms it is indeed very expensive looking. It chafes a little - he knows there’s no expectation that he’ll be responsible for this meal, but it doesn’t make him any more comfortable with the uneven footing. “Something about being very careful what you put into your body, which is probably the worst pun on earth, by the way.”

“Hardly a pun - I know what I’m looking at when gathering ingredients in a rather...uniquely insightful way, wouldn’t you agree?” Hannibal says with a smile and a carefully turned fork in his hand.

Will picks up his own fork, giving the very tenderly arranged root vegetable dish a glance, even while thinking it’s a bit excessive. “Is it going to be that kind of dinner?” asks Will.

“What kind is that?” returns Hannibal, taking a bite of what Will assumes is either the best part of a radish or a parsnip judging by the color. (*You can identify at least 30 species of carnivorous insects without much thought - why didn’t you leave bandwidth for produce?*)

“The kind where we allude to bad dietary decisions and I get to look like the weird one because I can either play word games with you to satisfy you and keep up polite company, or I can be blunt and make everyone in the restaurant uncomfortable with something they’ll assume is a very poorly timed scene we’ve decided to perpetrate on them.”

“I would probably say life is a poorly timed scene to please your need to be grim about it, but I am enjoying myself and don’t really agree, and you don’t want to discuss that right now, do you?”

Will winces around the crispy snap of a carrot and the taste of salt and chili oil. “Maybe I do. Of course you’re having a great time,” Will says, beginning to methodically chew without taking his eyes away from the middle distance of the kitchen, chefs shuffling in front of them. “Of course you disagree. We’re sitting in a restaurant of your choosing, on a day trip of your choosing, arguably in each other’s company by your personal choice seeing as I fled your end of the country thinking that was the only way to regain some sort of control over my environment.”

Will bites into another carrot, catches flaky salt on his lip with his teeth. “You see how long that lasted.”

“Do things simply happen to Will Graham?” asks Hannibal, cutting a venous red wedge of beet. “Would you say that you don’t choose things to happen or for yourself, or are you simply a believer of predeterminism?”

“I wouldn’t say that I chose you, no, more like you were gifted to me like someone gifts a monkey’s paw," Will scowls.

“Your wishes granted in terrible ways by my hand?” He laughs. In a rare show of irritation, Hannibal fiddles with his utensils, turning the knife in his right hand over and over and over again, like he can’t settle on a dining position or offensive one. “I wonder at your failure to use your words and ask for me to leave you alone if that is all you’ve really taken from the last year. Take *that* to its logical conclusion.”

“Would you have? Left me alone?”

He doesn’t seem to have an answer for that. He insteads stalls for conversation by complimenting the drink service on their choices, and what do they think of the Oregon wine program versus neighboring states? An enthusiastic young man on staff is only too happy to talk about it, a line cook sniping periodically about the occasional inconsistencies. Will supposes that’s something of an answer.

Hannibal is silent towards Will through the rest of the course, as well as the soup course to focus on the meal with some dogmatic determination, only turning again to Will when the third plate is brought out - an attractive slice of skin-on steelhead trout shining from beneath a mound of wood sorrel and geranium flowers. The mixture is pleasantly rustic in flavor

despite the presentation, something he would consider doing himself. It's relatable. Will imagines this is why Hannibal feels secure again for a moment, though he says a surprisingly insecure, honest thing.

“No, likely not.”

What an admission - Will's stomach turns a little at the thought, not in dread but not quite excitement. He cuts into the fish and admires the flaky pink flesh, gleaming and yellowed with butter. “You managed well enough for a plate and a half of food - just carry that attitude for the rest of your earthly life, and you’ll have managed it like most of us do when friendships and romances fall apart. Maybe drink too much when you hear certain songs, or have a box of things you have to hide under the bed that you can’t look at but you can’t throw away.”

Hannibal smirk. “Well thank you for *that* unflattering portrait. You don’t actually want that though. Not the trite write off, or the vacuous absence.”

(*You really don’t.*)

“Not the first interpretation of someone selling their house, ghosting their workplace, and shedding off their social network that I’d have, but I guess you have all the doctorates between the two of us.” Will swipes a bite of fish through a cream sauce, and chews. It’s still damnably good. "You've spent a lot of time lately telling me what I don't want at the house. I guess it was only a matter of waiting before you turned it to topics of conversation too."

Hannibal is almost painfully perfect in his posture, back straight and head pointed forward like there are needles in the collar of his shirt holding it up.

“You have a great talent for understanding others, but so rarely confront yourself,” he says. “Or maybe you do, and the lady doth protest too much. Are the small indignities and threats you award me with your token show of resistance to forgiveness and understanding the truth of yourself? And they are small, Will,” he says pointedly. “You’re welcome to find some more high places to throw me from or heavy objects to lift if that’s the penitence you require from me - I have suffered worse for less important things, and would suffer a great deal for you to fully realize what you’re capable of.”

(*Again, the refrain: you could kill him. He might even thank you for it.*)

"I suppose you're right," Will snorts, taking another anxious bite, grinding a geranium in his mouth. (*It tastes like your neighbors house smelled in New Orleans, bright flowers lining the narrow stairs up to her porch. It tastes like leftover dirty rice in carryout containers, polite conversations over the deck rails. It tastes safe, even if this dinner doesn't.*) "You haven't really had a single thing happen to make you feel less than assured that I...what, have to deal with my feelings for you? That I'm going to come around on your favorite hobby like it's a question of acquiring a taste for it?"

"I try all things, I achieve what I can."

"What, no original Lecter witticisms tonight? Falling back on Melville to make your point again?"

"It's a text on vengeance, which you pour out slowly," Hannibal wryly adds, drinking an accompanying dry white wine, "and in strange stops and starts."

Will can't really argue that point - he does, oscillating between pleasure in a moment and reminders that he shouldn't take pleasure in them. He's heavy with a mountain of miscarriages of justice, but can't leave it behind. He's afraid he'll be alone if he does, and it's worse knowing that Hannibal knows. It's wasteful.

He makes it to the fourth course, when the strained peace falls apart.

The plate is a grainy black and grey, like pumice but heavy. A triad of rare cut venison slices on riced cauliflower and a splash of chimichurri makes Will think of car tail lights at night. It's uncomfortably similar to his nightmare creature, each bit of meat straight from the haunch of the stag like he cut it from a loin himself. He can't eat it.

It really isn't the restaurant's fault. They can't possibly know. It's Hannibal's. Not today maybe, but definitely many times over in the past. The expectation that Will should be over it

all, from Garrett Jacob Hobbs to Baltimore State, because a nice thing happened today is so low an expectation (*for even you*). The gall of it makes him nauseous. He excuses himself quietly after sipping the red wine poured with the course and watching the green sauce over the venison separate for a moment too long, utensils idle on either side of the plate.

The hostess seems surprised when Will doesn't veer towards the restroom but the door. Hannibal seems perturbed, but he's pulled his best mask on, and Will can't pretend to understand its seams. He doesn't really expect Hannibal to follow him when the front entry door swings open. There's two more courses left.

(*You're beginning to think Hannibal may be entirely earnest in his inability to see why you're angry and in his pursuit of you. He doesn't understand you often feel like a hare pursued by hounds.*)

He breathes in the still-light evening air and lets the chill seep the hot anxiety from his neck and hands until he can stop wringing them in his pockets, standing curbside and thankfully alone for a moment.

Hannibal catches him outside the restaurant, pacing back and forth and fishing for a cigarette in a coat pocket that he quickly realizes he doesn't have a lighter for, and that Hannibal would probably physically die at the prospect of using the one in his car for, assuming it even has one. Modern cars lack so many practical things - a button for every convenience, but not a master key or manual shift to be seen.

"This is too much for me."

"The meal, or the conversation?"

"For the love of God, can you please not lead with a therapeutic or philosophical course of conversation for once?" Will says with mounting irritation.

“You are impotently angry.”

Will spins the cigarette between his fingertips. “Was it the four courses of bitter conversation that keyed you in?”

“Three, you only tried the first half of the evening’s program. And you are only as impotently angry as you wish to be. There’s any number of ways to burn off that kind of anxiety. I myself found a creative outlet for anger that has served its purpose for many years.” Hannibal crosses his arms, somewhat smug.

Will laughs. Puns again. Innuendos when he’s finally having a breakthrough emotional crisis. The man managed three instances of concise thought without underlying meaning through the meal and now, and he’s already back to spinning an elegant dialogue instead of talking. Will feels every pulse of blood through his face like a headache. He should do something. He will.

Will laughs a little more, and swings his fist out, almost like an experiment. He feels something like pride when it connects with Hannibal’s face, harder than he was planning for. His hand hurts with white-hot ache instantly. Three knuckles will be sprained, at least two fingers jammed, but one lovely black eye is all Will needs right now to give his frustration an avatar. It’s over very quickly, barely the blink of an eye, just enough time to contemplate the muscle and bone around Hannibal’s skull and how good it feels to damage them.

Hannibal staggers, throwing his hand up, looking at Will with his uncovered whiskey-brown eye with pain and momentary wrath. His nose is bleeding.

Once the shock of it has worn off, Hannibal laughs, that same single laugh he does when Will surprises him with pain. It obviously hurts him, but he simply takes a few deep breaths and begins probing his face exploratorily. His thumb is a mess of snot and blood. It's the least dignified Will thinks he's seen him.

“Have I burned off my anger to your satisfaction, Hannibal?” Will breathes, almost quaking with something like relief. His arms are shaking with eased tension.

Hannibal, still a little breathless, has his best sphinx look on. “Very good, Will. You don’t punch as hard as your father does,” Hannibal says with a nasally tone, pinching one side of his nose to stem the flow of blood. His left eye waters furiously, even as his face is his usual unflappable calm, but he does give off something of a low rumbling groan. “Or maybe you just don’t focus on soft tissues the same way he does. An experiment for a future visit, possibly.”

(*“Had ourselves a meetin’ of minds, told ‘im that yours was best left alone. He went about his business, and I went on mine,” says Beau. So that’s what that was all about.*)

Will can’t stop the shaking in his arms, but still finds it in himself to roll his eyes, both at Hannibal and at his father. “Daddy doesn’t waste time on moral quandaries. Probably thought you talked too much or said something indecent.” Will looks again at his cigarette, pinching it between the middle and ring finger.

“A very astute theory.” Hannibal half-smiles; he’s clearly avoiding using the left side of his face to emote more than necessary. “It seems our evening has found a crescendo, and it was unfortunately not the tarte tatin with cranberry and fennel. Allow me to drive you home - I will avoid saying additional ugly truths before the Graham clan manages to jointly cave my nasal ridge in. Your lot seems to be charmingly punctual about reacting to them.”

“So what, you can dump me in a marsh somewhere for ruining dinner? I don’t want a ride home, I want a walk - somewhere preferably that I don’t have to engage in our hundredth conversation about the human condition and how I’m probably some Virgilian doomed hero and that I’m striking down my mentor, or some other overblown bullshit.” Will knows he’s beginning to sound vaguely hysterical, but he finds himself pocketing his hands anyway to hide the tremor.

“So then I am to wait here at your leisure until you’ve had...what, an evening constitutional for your benefit?”asks Hannibal, head cocked to the side with a mean glance, still favoring his cheek with his fingers. He’s found a handkerchief to push his nostril closed for the time being.

(*But you know -y ou’re the cautious child of an inconstant father. You know how to get a ride home.*)

“It’s what you did to me,” says Will, checking his wallet. Three twenties and a handful of ones crinkle in the fold - it should be enough for what he needs. “Or is that not what boxing me up in prison was for? But no,” he adds. “I don’t really expect you to wait around as I won’t be back here any time soon. See you in Astoria.”

Hannibal pauses, eyes listing over Will’s face before sighing long and loud. It’s probably the closest he gets to emoting displeasure without objects or homicide. Imagining him doing so over Cassie Boyle spilling coffee, or some other mundane everyday inconvenience raises Will’s ire further still.

“I’ll drive you back - it’s at least two hours by car, and raining.”

“It’s *always* raining this time of year,” Will snipes, fumbling with his scarf, tucking the ends into his jacket. There’s no hood, so unfortunately nothing to be done about his hair, but so it goes.

“You’re being unreasonable,” Hannibal frowns. Will admires the darkening colors of his cheek. “Do you really plan to hire a car all the way back out to the coast?”

“I’ll take the bus, like all the other peasants, or is that unthinkable to you?” Will hisses over his shoulder, turning towards the street light.

Will walks purposefully away, ignoring the frustrated hiss of Hannibal’s breath, something torn between humor and frustration.

He’s being unfair on this occasion. While arguably Will could be unfair for the next 100 years and still not totally feel he’s returned the favor to Hannibal in the quantities he deserves, he also understands that it’s not the best way to get the response he wants. Hannibal’s always had an even temper with him, even at Will’s most heated, even now when Hannibal has to favor his stupid aristocratic face to stop from bleeding all over himself. But Will’s not in the market for patience - what he wants is a goddamn apology, and he could beat Hannibal blue and still not feel like the score is settled.

(*It doesn't work if you ask for it - you know him well enough to know he'd offer it in the spirit of knowing it was the response you wanted, as good a mirror as you* .)

It feels good to walk square by concrete square away from the restaurant and into the neighborhood until he's three city blocks away and comfortable looking back to see that he's not being stalked as recompense for the parting shot.

His vision's not great, even with glasses, so he pretends Hannibal is definitely not exactly where he left him, arms folded, dark and receding into the gloom of the autumn weather. If it's because he's frozen with anger, or simple indecision, it isn't really Will's business tonight. He's done.

Will manages to make good on his threat - he walks from the Hosford-Abernathy area to Union Station in about two hours time. His phone indicates it should only take about an hour, but he sees an opportunity to be by himself and itinerant again, and takes advantage. The bus schedule indicates it only leaves for Astoria once every two hours, and he's going to miss the next one even if he sprints.

(*You need to crawl out of your skin for a moment - no dogs, no work, no Hannibal.*)

The walk is refreshing, if a little bit soggy. The evening is beginning to darken, with low hanging gray clouds that promise something more substantial than what is now a fine wet mist falling and beading on the surface of his waxed canvas jacket. The city itself is interesting and disparate in its appearance even now in the growing dark - funky, hand painted signs call people into small shops, and old warehouses rust and fade along the banks of the Willamette River. Soggy leaves are in every gutter, homeless men and women settle in for an unpleasant night along the freeway overpasses and bridges. He trades two cigarettes for a light up, and watches the blown smoke run away from him, white and opaque in the cold weather.

He loiters around the Buckman Bridge's west side as he begins to get closer to the bus depot, taking in the river greenbelt and skeletal cherry trees that are dropping their leaves in rattling heaps. Canada geese are in uncomfortable abundance, so he makes a point to sidestep them, instead sheltering from the spitting drizzle of rain under some oaks that still offer some cover.

Above the neighboring building, the '**Portland Oregon'** sign is a familiar beacon of obnoxiousness, red and green and white in blazing lines of neon. It's centerpiece, the leaping stag, makes Will want to throw up both hands and flip it off.

Instead he takes a picture with his phone, and texts it to Beau. It's more innocent as a 2 by 4 inch digital image - something to be smiled at and forgotten in a few weeks.

Something you might have seen before , he writes, and waits for it to send. ***Missed it on the way in last time.***

The feeling rooting around behind his eyes is also familiar and obnoxious. This isn't a moment of deja vu, but a moment of failure, even if he knows dismissing Hannibal's bullshit is something of a pyrrhic victory for him. It's not that long ago he was harborside in Baltimore, looking at the sugar factory, contemplating what to do, and if there was anything to even be done.

(*What are you doing now? Do you think you can sail across the ocean and maybe take up reed fishing in Cambodia or something? Would that finally be remote enough to avoid Hannibal and any other lingering shades, or are you going to start being honest about all this?*)

So maybe he responded incorrectly the first time. He feels good about moving, about sloughing off the FBI and obligations that didn't serve him. He's healthier for it, in control of his body and of his lifestyle, barring the parts that Hannibal has seen fit to invade with comfortable ritual instead of trauma. He feels good about leaving Hannibal to sort out his own convoluted mess and deny him the satisfaction of his company and understanding for as long as he has, but it just hasn't taught Hannibal the way he thought it would.

Obviously the older man has some lingering attachment of his own. Will has him pegged as a sociopath from day one in prison, who has either an intense academic understanding of people or the emotional acuity to empathize with them and then drop the sensation like a hot rock when it doesn't serve his purposes. Will clearly gets the brunt of this, with the added expectation that Will can oracularly understand him in turn with no actual input. He's not entirely sure Hannibal actually *does* understand that Will is maligned, not burdened with destiny or some other pontificated reason why Will gets to suffer while Hannibal gets all the benefits.

(*“I wonder at your failure to use your words and ask for me to leave you alone if that is all you’ve really taken from the last year. Take that to its logical conclusion.”*)

Will supposes subtlety and small cruelties aren’t really having an impact. He turns on his heel away from the sign, back north towards the courthouses and the bus station. Time to go - the sun’s going down anyway.

He guesses that leaves blunt honesty.

He sleeps on the bus for two of the three hours. He's cold from his hair soaking up the slow falling drizzle, but stress finally takes the shakes from his hands and allows him to rest in exhaustion. There’s only four other passengers heading out this late, a small family with children who are quiet and as tired as he is. They have been in Forest Park, living a completely bland suburban middle-class life with their Saturday, and Will has to remind himself not to resent them for it. He’s had to leave his vision of an average life behind at the coffee shop. Maybe years before that if he’s being truthful.

He dreams the stag follows in the muck-logged reeds on the roadside, and he’s happy to see it oily smooth in the headlights of cars, bounding over brambles and trash and murky stands of water that match it with glistening lines of rainbow-bright ferrous iron sheen. There’s no cuts taken from its lean flank, drowned in sauce and plated for a diner’s amusement.

When he gets home after walking from the Astoria Transit Station, the dogs are pleased to see him, but less anxious than he thought they would be, still warm from sleeping upstairs on the blankets. It makes more sense when he looks properly at the kitchen counter, where a crisp white square of cardstock is - some kind of mailer that has been flipped over and carefully written on with a roller ball pen.

The dogs are walked. I didn’t know when you would be back, only that it seemed I shouldn’t follow and offer a ride a third time, and that the least I could do was make sure they were settled while you sorted it out. Please let me know when you get back safely.

Will doesn't need a signature to know Hannibal's flowing and sharp handwriting. He wishes he understood him as a person half as well as the graphology of his penmanship. He still doesn't text him, and instead goes to bed.

There's a quiet week following Saturday, where Hannibal does whatever his equivalent to licking wounds is, and Will just allows himself to be tired and nap where he can. Hannibal had politely left his car parts when he walked the dogs, so Will gets an opportunity to work on the Volvo in peace. Eventually, mid work week after Will starts wondering if maybe he's finally knocked sense back into his friend-enemy-complication, Hannibal makes a reappearance with coffee, and a garnet red shiner under his left eye and a small nasal splint. He's put some sort of topical anesthetic on it, making it shiny in the dull morning light.

"Amaretto latte," Hannibal says, passing the coffee cup to Will. "I bought some complimentary Honduran roasted beans on the way out of the city Saturday, as well as a cup full of ice."

"I won't apologize," says Will, accepting the coffee, but eyes still stuck on Hannibal's bruise.

"Oh I wouldn't want you to," Hannibal says breezily, opening the yellow umbrella. "I did ask for it. You couldn't see the one your father gave me to appreciate it, and now I have a proper collection."

Rare autumn good weather means rare time outside for him and the dogs. He can't exactly call it a beautiful weekend - the sun has maybe peeked out a total of five times, but it's not raining, the wind wasn't cutting at his fingers when he got into the boat Friday morning, and the overall temperature is less like a battered coastal cliffside and more like a woodland stroll that you get your favorite scarf out for and drink tea on the porch afterwards.

When Saturday morning dawns with grey skies, billowing chilled breath, and the barest amount of chilly fall damp on the front lawn, he texts Hannibal.

Do you have much interest in lighthouses, or have you already charted the western coastline to your satisfaction?

Hannibal doesn't take much longer afterwards to show up, dressed in the practical hiking boots again and a comfortable sweater. His ability to look fresh out of both a menswear magazine and a sportsmans catalogue irritates Will as much as he appreciates it. Someday maybe he'll gift him some flash orange gear and see if he can pull it off. Hannibal can probably wear a burlap sack like an emperor though, courtiers praising as he goes.

Riding in a car together is comfortable but bizarre. Mostly in an uncanny valley way, where Will wishes he could still fall asleep coming off a long day of profiling, and Hannibal obliges him with a ride back to Quantico to pick up his car. Also in part because of the initial drive into Portland, where everything had ended on a bad note and a long bus trip. The tone of the rides feels the same, but the geography and history of it is a different country.

Will's driving this time, so at least he knows he'll for sure have a ride. He jokes when they pull into the state park that he should grab the bus schedule just in case Hannibal needs it. Hannibal, with Buster in his lap, asks if Will would like a matching nose splint so they can really pull the parallel together. Winston pushes his snout into the crook of Will's arm. They both smile, temporary truce established.

The not very aptly named Waikiki Beach is a long grey and beige stripe against the grey-blue ocean, not even vaguely like Hawaii despite sharing a body of water. Stands of spruce and black pine sit short and battered at its edges, where Spanish moss hangs from the boughs and birds shelter in the low branches while huge cold waves crest and repeat in patterns that read in clean mathematical dependability. Hannibal admires it when they first step out onto the sand, avoiding the kelp and driftwood that have been washed up high towards the treeline. Crossing the lines of dried foam to tread out onto clean wet sand is night and day - the wind picks up, the mist from the water is stinging, and Will can feel the chill in his cheeks. The dogs run out ahead of them, pleased as can be. The lighthouses on either end of the coast are unreachable today - closed for maintenance, though on their high cliffs they are gleaming white towers.

“It is a different sea from the ones I am most familiar with,” Hannibal comments on his right, pulling at the edges of his gloves to better cover his wrists. “The Baltic does not have the strength of the North Sea, and in turn the North Sea does not have the force of the Pacific, stretching uninterrupted across half the globe.”

“Every body of water has it’s tells - this one just happens to be cold, turbulent waters in the north and the championship title for size,” says Will, gathering lengths of dog leash in his hand to keep them from dragging. “It’s not a sea I knew before this year either, at least not more than the occasional conference in LA, and that’s hardly the same experience.”

(*No, you don’t think it counts - the unhappy blue-brown waters of the Los Angeles shoreline flying over Inglewood is hardly an introduction to the city itself, even less so the ocean. You are dizzy the entire time with the press of people, commerce, and urban grime and think nothing of Santa Monica beach and other sites you’ve seen in post cards. You couldn’t wait to leave.*)

They walk in a wind-beaten silence, Will’s ears stinging as they go. He thinks on his first day driving into Astoria, and the steady heavy confidence of the bridge and the broken pier posts that the gulls gathered on, and the Columbia steadily marching into the sea. It’s the first meeting of a force beyond caring about him, and it is comforting to know it will continue unbothered by him.

The small waves come in and remove their footprints behind them, and Will contemplates if it wouldn’t be better if a larger one swept in and took the two of them away. Sneaker waves, the serial killers of the sea. It would certainly be less obnoxious than this pattern of dressing each other down and then ignoring it that they’ve been perpetuating. The trip to Portland certainly throws *that* into sharp focus.

But he said it himself - he needs to try out blunt honesty. He’ll start with the essentials, and there's no time like now, in a remote location, unaccompanied by people to intervene on anyone's behalf.

“Do you actually understand why I’m here?” Will asks.

Hannibal hums. “In terms of existence, or latitudinal location?” When he sees Will frown, he raises his hands. “A great deal happened in Baltimore and Minnesota. You were not given time to process it on your own terms. It has always been a comfort of mine to know we can cast off our names and make new lives. Considering the circumstances, I’m sure it was a comfort to you as well.”

“All my friends were wearing your colors - seemed like the kind of scenario that you’re supposed to concede the loss and accept exile,” Will says with a shrug. “My house didn’t feel like it was mine, and I don’t think I could get a single person to convict you without substantial evidence, even now. I certainly couldn’t get them to be my friend over yours, and I can tell you, did *that* ever sting.”

Hannibal looks out over the beach, hair beginning to muss in the western wind. Will takes the rare moment to look closely at him - blonde eyelashes, smooth face with only the vaguest laugh lines. (*Maybe frown lines - he smiles so rarely, you know something else must have put them there.*) He seems not uncomfortable, but nonplussed.

After some length, he tilts his head out of the wind to look back at Will. “I prefer your company to theirs. They enjoy the easiness of my attention, not the reality of it - yours is sharp and piercing, and doesn’t waste much time with banalities,” says Hannibal, turning to him again. “It makes it harder for other people to understand you or to properly appreciate you.”

“Speaking from experience?” asks Will, bending for a piece of white-blonde driftwood. “And what, I should be happy that you prefer my sharp and piercing company because you like unusual things? I’m so glad we could eliminate the rest of my social circle for the benefit of your shallow affectations with each other. You isolated me, deliberately,” Will says, as factually and bland as he can. There’s frustration building behind his tongue, down in the chords of his throat. He smooths the driftwood between his fingers, feeling only the slightest pinch from a weathered edge. “And then had the gall to be surprised I didn’t want to stay in your company.”

“You didn’t want the burden of responsibility for the old life of Will Graham, and all that it entailed. Otherwise you would have trekked your way down to your father to regain stability, or gone back to the profiling. The FBI’s handling of your case and your sentencing was surely enough to ensure you didn’t want more of the same, so here you are.”

“No Hannibal, you did that. I didn’t want to see you anymore, so I sold my house and gave away almost all my dogs. You won. Does it feel good?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer, walking in step with Will, mouth in a soft moue of unhappiness. They eventually detour to safer havens: nesting plovers on the sandy beaches, what remains to be done in the living room and kitchen, if lunch is out of the question if all of the ingredients are purchased in each other’s company and eaten right after.

The ride back is uncomfortable in a way Will is unfamiliar with, an undesired parallel to the ride out. He almost regrets his bluntness no matter how much Hannibal professes to prefer it, like it’s killed the moment. Hannibal is his usual calm self, but his conversating is hollow, eyes in a different place. Will looks at the breakwaters and moss growing in the trees, and responds in kind.

They’re working late on Sunday night, installing sconces on either side of the Victorian fireplace mantel. Or at least Will is installing sconces, and Hannibal is spectating. In his mind’s eye, they cast the room into an intimate yellow glow, even with the cold lights of the harbor twinkling in the windows. Hannibal isn’t much manual help - he largely just tells Will when his placement is uneven, admiring the new bulbs between his hands. He seems lost in thought, eyes tracing the tungsten coils within.

Will tries to pay him no mind, and focuses instead on the tools in his hands, and the soreness of his fingers. While it is unusual for Hannibal to sink into himself while Will is present, he’s been like this since yesterday.

Right now there’s a job to do. He has work in the morning. He has bills, responsibilities, dogs to walk, drywall to repair. He has something of a life here, what little he can hold onto. He’s starting to tentatively hope Hannibal is part of it, but everything about that feels unrealistic, no matter how much time he spends in Astoria with Will.

Proving he is both a masochist and idiot, now seems like as good a time as any to poke that particular sore. He's tired of feeling anxious about being too blunt on the beach. It’s grounding listening to Hannibal talk, and it’s emotionally grounding for Will to have a

baseline to read for truths and lies. (*If you interpret wrong, well, that's just another string of your bad luck.*)

"So realistically, how long can you actually get away with shelving your life?"

Hannibal tenses, and blinks, expression blank. He didn't expect Will to ask that - it's viscerally pleasing to catch him off guard. "Come again?"

Will shrugs, lining up a mounting plate. "You're not like me in that way - you have routines, and rituals, and a clandestine group of acquaintances that you like to play host to. Contacts at the FBI, fancy dinner parties, galas where people identify you as the handsome European man with all the svelte charm of a duke. People to eat, appointment books to fill." He finds himself over tightening screws, thinking about it. "We talked about me taking refuge in routines here, but what about you, Hannibal? When does the clock tick down for you in this little city in the middle of nowhere? You seem to be putting a lot of faith in me to entertain you. Even you can run out of trails to walk and errands to run."

Hannibal looks consideringly at the bulb in his hand, handing it to Will once the mount is in place. "I don't pretend to hold much value in my life in Baltimore. It is mostly an amusement. Anything of value can be shipped or will keep with time. Professional contacts always do a favor for a favor," he says with a flat smile. "I have done well enough in my life that should I wish to retire in Astoria and never leave again, it could be so."

"Should that impress me?"

"No, but it should give you a frame of reference for how easy it is for me to cast off the costume of Hannibal Lecter, socialite and psychiatrist."

Will measures the height of the light fixture again to double check their evenness, mulling that statement. How easy to cast off a costume and be a different person - Will envies his ease. Will is a hundred different people every day, and none of them easy. No masks like Hannibal, just wholly subsumed by their reality. He hates it and often himself, but he can't hate every other person. (*They're all just living and dying like you, a thousand gasping disappointments and decisions spread along the years. How liberating it must be to wear them as a mask, and not their skin as a mantle.*)

“Do you value anything?” asks Will, honestly curious. “Or is it all just a parade of moments? Taking opportunities where they arise.”

Hannibal shifts on his feet, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a drink he's had on the mantle. It’s such a small movement that it should be inconsequential, but with the shift in weight comes a shift in attention. “You are always determined to make me choose one method of thought. I’d say again, can it not be both? I value myself and my perception. I value beauty, and moments that lead to beauty. Everything that happens to you is just electric pulses flashing before your eyes - I choose to live in the moment rather than be obsessed with how they came to be, or counting them down.”

Will flips the light switch with a little prayer. He sighs with contentment when the warm color paints the plaster walls from the twin sconces, warms the beams of wood in the living room. The fireplace is a maw of cast iron and wood in sore need of a strip and revarnish - he still needs to fix the flue. He has a lot of things to still fix. His throat feels tight when he looks at Hannibal, and then glances down to turn the screwdriver in his hands. The handle is clear acrylic and bright like a jewel. It’s a humble kind of brightness compared to the lamps.

Will squints at his hands, avoiding facing Hannibal. “I’ve had very little my entire life - I’d imagine you can appreciate it, orphan that you were. But I’ve never had a glut that made things comfortable after the fact. No Parisian boarding schools or wealthy childless family members. Daddy did what he could, but by most standards it wasn’t much. I ought to resent him for living in the bottom of a bottle, but I knew him too well.”

“Hard to hate something you understand,” Hannibal says with a nod.

A wry smile from Will. “Hard to hate what you feel like is yours. I’m washed with his mannerisms, and probably several others. Even you. I’ve always had to scrape the walls for what made Will Graham. It was never an obvious paint color, always covered in different ones.”

(*Everyone likes a different color. You don’t dare tell them the real one. You’re lucky you don’t know what it is.*)

“I don’t know if you’ve ever truly felt what it’s like to not have a sense of self,” Will continues, still fidgeting with the screwdriver. “I don’t know if you understand that I have a

hard time identifying with you sometimes, and that I am achingly grateful for the chance to not just be a reflection of you, but also resentful because you are so alien to me at times."

Hannibal is quiet for a while, turning his tumbler in his hands. His face is blank. He is looking at the bridge and the condensation on the windows from the heat inside. It's not even a shadow on the horizon as much as a series of green slivers cut by the fog lights in the distance. "Do you truly think you don't understand me?" he asks.

"When I think I do, I second guess myself. I thought I knew you last year, and you let my mind slip away into the cracks. You seem to be ok with that. I have a hard time dealing with your satisfaction in the result over the means it took to get there."

Hannibal frowns. "You resent me for accelerating your understanding of yourself. The thoughts were always there - I knew if you would let them out, you'd at last be able to take a breath of air."

"I resent you for playing at being my friend," says Will, voice tight, dropping the screwdriver on the floor and watching it roll into a corner. "Maybe you are, and that's worse. I let you get the closest I've let anyone be to me since I was a kid, and do what I thought was helping me get out of the deep water when Jack chummed the surface with murders. I resent you for being that, and then letting my brain rot like bad fruit on the tree. I thought you cared, and it seemed like a big joke to you to send me to prison and absolutely trash what little pride I had in who Will Graham was. And then to come here, against what I thought was pretty obviously my wishes, and act like I should be *grateful* …"

Will grits his teeth, suddenly feeling the dampness of his eyes.

Hannibal sets his drink down, and crosses the room, a hand placed on both of Will's shoulders. Will doesn't wince, even if it reminds him of being directed after finding himself in Hannibal's dining room, boiling alive with fever. The touch is more hesitant, softer. His voice is raspy. "You should be grateful. Grateful to be the remarkable boy you are in a senseless universe that so rarely grants the kind of awe inspiring insight that you have." He pauses, clasping a little less soft. " *I* am grateful for you. Every ugly and beautiful thing has brought us to this moment, and I wonder still if I've done enough to help you understand me even now."

Hannibal closes his eyes for a moment, and brings his hands up to Will's neck, relaxed and careful. When he opens them again, his brows are pinched like he's in pain. “It is always both - I delight in our closeness, our easy understanding, and I delight in seeing you scry my designs for the world and you. It is more than I had hoped to experience.”

Will tries to not meet his eyes, staring over his shoulder at the windows where Hannibal looked before. “So what, you love what I am and you love how I hurt being what I am? Nothing more sincere than emotions played out to their most extreme?”

“Yes.” A hand comes up to rest behind his neck, hot as a brand, carding the hair there. “You are *so* lovely in extremis.”

“How flattering, plenty of healthy traits there,” Will deadpans, even as he feels his throat tighten, face burning. “How do I know anything you say is real? You could just be playing me for an idiot. You certainly had Alana’s number down. Poor Will Graham, can’t tell affection apart from manipulation, as dumb as any high school aged teenager when faced with the appearance of intimacy.”

He tries to move his head away and recollect himself. He’s so busy trying to hide his face, which he can feel getting hot and splotchy, that he entirely misses Hannibal’s swift change in stance. Hannibal bites him, savagely hard on the shell of his ear. Will almost yelps out loud, jerking his head away but finds himself unable to make a noise when Hannibal rests his face on the top of Will’s head and kisses the stinging burn of the bite.

Will catches his breath, and draws his head back. Feels dizzy, feels aroused. WIll Graham just feels a lot of things. Hannibal has his usual intense look, the one that makes Will think of the gulls fixated on the fisherman’s catch.

“You don’t know,” says Hannibal, resolute and simple. “You accept that we are two men with agency in this world, enjoying a blink of an eye in the chronology of the universe. Only know that I treasure you for the rare thing that you are and want you to be.”

“A mirror?”

“No, an equal. A confidante. An occasional kindred spirit who has forgotten its delight in savagery, but not its appreciation of it.” He gives him a long look, petting the curls at the base

of his neck, tracing his mouth and beard with his eyes. He waits until Will meets eyes with him again, and Will can't help but think how handsome and angular he looks, something to break himself on like a sea wall.

"You are what you are going to be, Will. I recognize a part of the creature that you are, even if you won't share it with me just yet. It's enough to know that you can also be both."

Hannibal's hand comes up the side of his throat to his chin, fingers gliding over his lips, grabbing hold of the point of his jaw. He kisses him slow before Will's head stops ringing and the desire for reciprocity starts gnawing at him, and Will thinks, *yes, this* . Will relaxes, hands coming up to Hannibal's sides, not sure what he's doing.

(*You never really know - you extrapolate and pray.*)

Hannibal takes one of Will's hands, kisses the wrist and then returns to kiss his mouth again, teeth clicking against Will's as he deepens it, and then roughly, biting at him. "May I?" he rasps.

"May you what?" Will asks in a daze, lip burning.

Hannibal draws back to put both hands under his chin, considering his cheekbones with his thumbs. From this close, Will can see a nebula of burst blood vessels on the bridge of his nose and under his eye, not yet healed from the weekend before. "May I have you for this moment, separate from all the other dramas and distractions, whether by my hand or yours. I wish to show you something different from that."

"I won't forget what you did, if that's what you want," Will says quietly.

Hannibal's thumb presses over his eyelid, feeling his wet eyelashes as he goes. "I suspect if there's any other woodworking disasters that can befall me, neither will I."

Will huffs a breath out, not quite a laugh, but something adjacent. He can't think of the right thing to say - he just needs to be needed. He wants this to be uncomplicated. Is it uncomplicated, a diversion from the plot? Is he ruining this? He settles for humor to break his own seriousness. "I suppose with our history, written consent forms probably are the way to go, though this would definitely be new territory," he says into Hannibal's neck, where the collar of his shirt still smells of aftershave. Resolve settles into the pit of his stomach.

"Something not yet stained, then," Hannibal says into his hair, curling a strand around his index finger.

Will lifts his head and reaches out, returning in kind the brutal, biting kiss from before until both of them are nursing bloody lips, grabbing at each other's arms and clothes. (*He delights in savagery, so delight him.*) He doesn't know if he's ever been so aggressive and destructive in a quest for vulnerable skin, for the truth of a human form. Hannibal matches his ardour with hands that are everywhere, feeling out every scar and hollow and sensitive twitch of his muscles. Shucking out of clothes feels more like shucking off an old skin, and they, shining scales clean, push against each other everywhere they can.

When Hannibal drops to his knees to take Will's hardness in hand and into his mouth, Will can hardly think of a future where he imagined this. It's humbling, even as he brushes his hand through the fine hair at the base of Hannibal's neck and tries to not fall down from the shock and the foreign sublimeness of the moment, like he's only just imagined it. This might not have been in the back of his mind until recently, but thoughtful questing fingers from Hannibal speak to a great deal of time in the back of *his* , and his comfort with the situation bleeds into Will, calming his anxiety and inexperience.

They ease their way to the floor of the living room, leaning side by side, Hannibal careful but forceful with his attentions like a man starved, and Will wrapped around him like he's the last land before the open sea. Mentally, Will knows even by his straight upbringing that Hannibal is keeping things as even-grounded and uncontrived as possible, no more than each other's slick hand around the other's cock, but it feels like so much more, an ebb and tide that rather than sinking into his stream, Will wades into the spark-hot questing eyes, hands, and mouth and allows himself to be present and forget about other things.

Hannibal adores with his mouth, as a carnivore does, pairing gentility with nips and bites that Will is half-conscious of leaving a kaleidoscope of teeth impressions and reddened skin. He arches away and towards teasing teeth at his nipples, determined to keep pace and aroused by the power of rendering Hannibal down to the same baseness of need. (*Oh but it feels different, it feels cradling.*) They both are almost entirely silent, despite Hannibal's typical

verbosity. Heavy breath, naked staring, and a warm closeness that Will doesn't know if he recognizes in all his human experience and imaginings.

It pulls tears from Will, throwing his face into Hannibal's shoulder when it becomes too overwhelming. Hannibal forces him back to meet his mouth again with blistering tenderness, and Will is driven to his edge with the glow of the new lamps making spots in his eyes. Hannibal is silent still, but shakes, breathing open mouthed into the hair at Will's temple, and the quiet of the night descends on them.

"The yellow really does complement your fairness," Hannibal says, when they lay still, sliding hands over the shell of his bitten ear, down the column of a throat. He admires suck marks and bruises like a sculptor, pushes into one he likes best in the shadow of his pelvic bone. "Billions of people, all as aware as cattle, and not a one of them as awe-striking and singular as you."

"Are you really talking about the dumb rug right now?"

Hannibal smiles. "I'd like to think I can have a few trains of thought going at any time. In this case they are both pointed at you. Aren't you pleased to find out my interior decorating jokes end happily after all?"

"Only a few of them, huh?" Will jokes. "I assumed a far more elaborate mental transit system than that." Hannibal sighs with a smile, nipping at Will's neck. "I still hate the rug. It's ostentatious."

Both of them are cold, even Will can see the goosebumps on Hannibal's arms as they run aground. When he rises, he motions for Hannibal to stay for a moment before he returns with a cloth to clean up, and the freshest of his thrift blanket finds, an absolutely ridiculous mound of quilts, coverlets, and fleece throws that make a comfortable pile. Hannibal pulls him close, and they eventually fall into a quiet open-eyed rest, listening to the redwoods near the property rustle in the wind. If they both leave the room, the moment ends, and so they must not leave.

Will leans his head back, and sees the lights of the bridge through the window, and thinks he feels good - he really does, and what a rare thing it is. The feeling of warm skin is burned into him like a brand, broad hands on the crease of his hips. Reverence. Possession. Even now on top of an unfortunate pink and brown floral polyester blanket, Hannibal is a second skin against his back, running his hands over the scar on Will's shoulder where Jack shot him. (*A scar by proxy - though hindsight says Hannibal would have had it the other way around, as long as you did it* .)

Hannibal doesn't sleep, and Will does his best to take comfort in the proprietary strength of his grip, the lazy contentment of fleece and ugly crocheted yarns and the smell of expensive cologne and sweat. The bridge lights are the twinkle of stars, constant, the green of its beams windows cutting the night.

act 4 - let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's never really cared for the phrase "the morning after". The implication is that the main event has passed - everybody go home, nothing left to do. Last days of Rome kind of shit. The morning after has notes of physical or emotional cleanup, recovering from hangovers, poorly chosen meals that you hope will help you heal. Morning afters are typically regrettable, or gross, or worse still, awkward. This morning after promises a level of complexity that Will thinks he needs about 30 years of additional emotional maturity to really process. Maybe a beer in the shower while he's at it.

At some point in the night, despite the screaming cold in his toes and his shoulder going numb from neck to fingertips, as well as the unequivocally bad idea that is trying to rest against someone with a track record of doing bad things to him when he is unconscious, Will does manage to fall asleep. Some of it is simple tiredness - he's not a great believer in a full night's rest, but he also isn't in the habit of being awake past 3 am. Some of it is how nice it is to curl up against someone that isn't primarily hair the way that the dogs are.

(*You spare them a gracious thought. They have kept to themselves upstairs through most of the nighttime hours, though Buster does come down from the bedroom with the smallest clicks of his nails against the hardwood floors and sticks his nose in your ear. He jealously returns to the upstairs when Hannibal doesn't make room for him to wedge between you. Winston, in the earliest dawn hours, looks you over with concern because you are not in bed, but seeing as you're also not about to step off the edge of your roof in your sleep, you presume he finds this ok and also returns to the air mattress.*)

He wakes to the sound of rain, heavy sky full of marine clouds that promise a long soaking morning. The light from the street lamps and clouds is just barely enough for Will to see the slope of Hannibal's neck, and the placid half-lidded gaze of his eyes. The older man clearly hasn't slept, but has lain there quietly and still as a statue. Hannibal blinks once when he realizes Will is awake, coming back to himself, like he's been somewhere else until this point.

Will moves his head to Hannibal's shoulder and closes his eyes, and wishes for five more minutes. It's cold, but they've made a warm spot of their pile of blankets, and daylight comes with a set of problems that Will isn't in the mood to deal with. Hannibal in turn moves a

cautious hand to the back of Will's head, combing the longer hair there with his fingers very carefully. On the occasion he hits a snag, he works it loose until each comb through is smooth and soothing. He doesn't know if anyone's done that for him before.

(*It makes you aware that you don't recognize the feeling of common familiar affections. No mother growing up, a surly withdrawn man for a father. Who combed your hair as a kid? You did.*)

The light's still dark blue outside - he can spare the five minutes, and closes his eyes again.

When the light grows bright enough for Will to start thinking about starting the day properly, his shoulder has reached peak pain. He's never been very good about following his physical therapy schedule, no matter if it's the right shoulder for the stab wound, or the left one from being shot by Jack. Someone should just give him body armor or bubble wrap to cover them up. Clearly it's historically a vulnerable point.

When he rolls a little into Hannibal's side, he just about gasps. Not for exciting reasons, like rallying for an encore morning tryst - he's just old, and not entirely sure he's going to be able to stand up.

"This is going to be murder," Will mutters, and feels Hannibal sigh with amusement. "Before you get all excited, I specifically mean the murder of my back. I don't think I've slept on the ground since New Orleans."

"Saving my murder for a special day, maybe Christmas?" Hannibal hums, his voice a little gruff with disuse. "Your ragtag collection of blankets has staved off the worst of it, but yes, I have slept in more comfortable backcountry hostels."

Will rolls onto his back and off the stinging pain in his shoulder. The ceiling with its stark white paint and brass candelabra light looks older in the early dawn hours. With the track record the house has, Will supposes they're lucky it didn't fall on them in the night the same way the entirety of the west coast is lucky it doesn't fall into the ocean in a catastrophic

earthquake. Given the events of the last year, maybe he can go for a two-for-one and get both. He'll check the wiring tonight when he gets home. Never know the odds of someday ending back down on the rug, and forewarned is forearmed.

"I suppose you'll tell me next that you've done no less than three pilgrimages through France and Spain and that the very rocks of Europe are superior to my floor," Will says with a snorting sigh.

Hannibal slowly lifts himself from the ground, stretching and very casual with his nudity. (*You, a shy violet since birth, stay firmly beneath your quilt where no one can see or comment on your network of bruises. They're your secret to keep.*) "Nonsense, your floor has two qualities that the hallowed floors of Europe don't have - you spent a great deal working on them and I've greatly enjoyed seeing you on it thereafter," he says with a sly smile, and finds his slacks to put on. "It's certainly more supportive than that air-filled monstrosity you keep upstairs like it's your first year away at university."

He continues to stretch, gathering articles of clothing as he goes. Will listens to the clicking of his shoulder blades, the occasional pop of joints as he methodically works each part of his arms and back until he is satisfied. The stretching especially highlights lean muscle, otherwise hidden by the layers and layers of clothes that normally disguise it. Will knows it's warm, even if the blue light of a rainy morning makes it appear unforgiving.

Will himself leans back into the blankets, sore-headed, dehydrated, and a little bit unprepared for the day. (*Or the repercussions. Don't forget about* that *anxiety attack waiting to happen.*) Hannibal's normality is reassuring, back to sniping at minor grievances and amusements, even as he avoids frowning at the wrinkles in his clothes. If anyone can't stand a walk of shame back home in yesterday's outfit, it's likely Hannibal Lecter.

The only indicator of something having changed, is when Hannibal leaves to go to his flat to shower, and leave Will some time to get ready for work.

Will rises from the floor in his jeans, one blanket out of the many he needs to clean up and wash still on the floor under his arm. He really just means to be polite - you see people to the door after a night together, right? He's obliged. But Hannibal takes a moment before heading towards the stairway down out of the kitchen and to the downstairs front door, considering Will for a moment.

To Will’s embarrassment and unexpected pleasure, Hannibal brushes his long fingers along bruises blooming on Will’s clavicle, a particularly harsh bite, and bends to kiss the flesh.

“Don’t forget to sanitize this,” he adds with a very clinical tone when he leans back up, before moving to the other side in parallel, and biting just as savagely.

Will yelps loudly, enough for Buster to come running from upstairs. Will's not sure if he should pull back and to keep the burn of it going, like it’s something needing finishing. When he pulls back again, Hannibal admires the redness of the skin with his thumb, the line of indentations deep and already purpling, hand on Will’s shoulder. Will just swears at him.

“What the fuck, Hannibal?” Will breathes out, grinding his jaw.

“So it matches,” Hannibal explains, half-smiling and teeth glinting. Will resents how attractive he is, sharp mouthed and crooked. (*Let’s call a spade a spade - he’s something beautiful to cut yourself on.*)

Will doesn’t watch him from the window when he turns to go. He doesn't check his phone for texts of thank yous or apologies for a quick exit. Even if he wants to, he knows their relationship isn’t supposed to be like that. (*Is it?*) He gets ready for work, and tries to focus on the buttons of his shirt after a shower, and how he’s going to keep the shop crew from commenting on his neck, where a small network of even smaller bruises follow from collarbone to the soft skin behind his ear. Like holly berries, festive and bright and red against the column of his throat.

It’s a hard start to the day without the ritual of the coffee, and the walk, and trying to feel grumpy and walked over with Hannibal and his stupid umbrella to see him off from the dock. The rain feels nice, stinging his ears but cooling his head. He makes it into the shop after Lori and Frank both, who are looking surprisingly chipper for a Monday morning. Lori, ever the soul of discretion, points at her neck with her currently plum-purple nails and gives Will a questioning look.

“Got into something,” Will says, like it’s no big deal and that it should explain everything. It’s not really a lie, it’s just also not a very understandable picture to paint. “Skin didn’t react

well.”

(*Or it reacted exactly as was desired - just not by you. Or do you enjoy catching a glimpse of it in the bathroom mirror, in the chrome of a ship railing, in the vividness of your imagination?*)

A day of work before coming back to the dock rights something in the universe. After hours of fixing the small wreckages of a weekend of salmon season, the repetition draws him into the safety of routine. Remove the casting line from the propeller shaft because turning the boat to avoid casting directly in the past of the engine is apparently too much work - done. Replace tiller on outboard motor after hanging weight off of it - irritating, but doable. Switch out electrical connection on depth transducer following sand bar incident - stupid tourist mistake, whatever, he thinks he can troubleshoot it without switching out the entire component.

These are all stories and problems that Will can understand with a glance. Fixable. Simple. Thoughtless. No emotional attachment outside the initial frustration and a satisfied pleasure when it’s completed.

Complication appears on the dockside on his way back home with a yellow umbrella and a grey and black houndstooth wool coat. With him, Winston and Buster wag tails between their leashes, thinking that they’re going for a ride. If he wasn’t determined to keep Hannibal off his boat, they might have done so.

“I hope you brought a towel,” Will shouts over the sound of Daisy’s engine as he pulls in close. “The dog smell is going to be pretty powerful until they dry out.”

Hannibal waits until Will has fully come into dock so he doesn’t have to shout back, ever conscientious of his bearing, tilting his head. “I was met with some enthusiasm when I went by and figured they would enjoy a lull in the rain and an earlier reunion for the day. As I also understand it, the brewery on the pier is pet-friendly.”

Hannibal doesn't say anything about the night before. (*The morning after.*) He's as unflappable and fixated on verbal sparring as ever, throwing the brewery he's open to dining at tonight with the bemused humor of a parent offering bread to throw to ducks. No jokes at Will's expense about being an emotional wreck 24 hours ago. No disparaging the town he's come to live in. It's something of a relief to know that the brewery, the whiskey bar, the seafood place, the corner coffee shop in the hotel...they don't suddenly get overridden, like Hannibal's won a game. (*How maidenly you sound, associating sex with loss - how old are you again?*) There's still rules for today. They're still Will's rules.

The only evidence that he acknowledges the night before at all is a long look at the small berry-red bite marks that Will's hair has done a serviceable job of disguising after Lori's only tease for the day. It's a hungry look, but quickly hidden, and Will doesn't catch him at it again even after they part ways for the night, Will taking the dog leashes in hand to head home.

(*You are afraid to look at them yourself. You are afraid to decide if you like them or hate them, because then you have to have a clear perspective on the whole thing, and you're barely clear on if you want the teeth marks to scar the way that stab wounds and gun shots do. Important, memorable things.*)

They don't touch, they don't say good night, and they don't part like it's any different from last week or the week before that. "Until tomorrow," says Hannibal, barely able to finish his own glass of a warm brown-red glass of gose, left on the long table of the brewery, forgotten. Unusual for him, a person inclined to not so much as leave a swipe of sauce on a plate.

Will pushes at one of the bruises on his chest when he gets home, and doesn't disinfect the bite. If the sting of it is all he gets to keep as a reminder, then he'll keep that.

There are differences in their interactions over the next couple of days, though none of them are earth-shattering. They're small things he'd take for granted if he wasn't looking for it.

Foremost of these is Hannibal texting him periodically during the day. Will would chalk it up to boredom, but it's really just the occasional picture of what the work week in the life of an itinerant Hannibal Lecter looks like. On Tuesday he sends a photo of the dogs looking down

from the living room windows at him. Will responds simply: ***At least they acknowledge they should be watching for something during the day.***

Trouble with the staff? Hannibal replies.

Their track record with unexpected guests does not earn them an employee of the month award. No bonuses this year.

Will frowns down at his phone, like he's said something admissable. Hannibal doesn't know Will's not talking about him, or at least only him - then again maybe he does.

Around mid-afternoon, Hannibal sends a couple of observations about the neighbor's tree shedding leaves into the yard (*which you tell him isn't a punishable offence*), that there's fresh smoked salmon and aquavit at a pop-up event downtown (*you're open to trying it*), and finally another photo of a seagull sitting quite comfortably on the railing of the upstairs porch. (*Well that explains the white stains.*)

Wednesday is a photo from the westbound bridge over the Young's River Bay, where the vertical lift had stopped morning traffic. In the distance on the water, Daisy is a recognizable if unimpressive spot of off-white on the horizon. It's close to his seagull feeding grounds. Hannibal must have gone to Cannon Beach earlier than usual for one of his teleconferencing appointments.

It's every bit as unremarkable on open water as it is in the harbor , Hannibal comments.

Functional doesn't have to be remarkable , Will replies. ***Functional just has to get from point A to point B.***

Another thing that Hannibal starts doing differently is watching - all the time. Will would be suspicious of it, but it seems to be curiosity for the most part. Curiosity over how he responds to foods, to minor irritations, to being surprised. It's not that Hannibal has ever been unobservant, but he's usually more subtle in his reptilian way of surveying people. Cataloguing. It's one of the few abnormal tells he has in his otherwise perfect facade.

The final thing and the only thing that Will can even sort of correlate to past physical intimacy, is Hannibal, who was previously too close all the time, is now startlingly respective of his personal space. A polite two to three feet away, which drives Will crazy with his inability to clearly understand it.

Is he avoiding being close to him? Did he accomplish what he set out to do and can now quietly slough him off after experiencing the substantially less erotic reality of sharing (*very intimate*) space with Will? Was it just something that needed exploring to a logical conclusion, like a hypothesis? Ah yes, here's that twitchy man with the penchant for bad decision making when improvising - do you think he'll bite or will he bend for affection when pressed?

The practical answer to that problem is to ask, but that feels needy, and revealing, and Will is not of the mindset to be any of these things today. He's had quite enough of being the one in compromising positions.

Will sets out a test of his own on a Friday night, when the air is cold enough that even Will is a little bit uncomfortable walking home from the whiskey bar without gloves. He generally doesn't bother with them, but an autumn storm has brought some early winter nastiness to his mellow port town. (*"Rain boots from here on out," Frank grouches, wiping droplets of rain from his face as he walks back in from the dock outside the shop. Scow studiously ignores him and his wet feet, nothing but a ball of orange fur that refuses to vacate the second shelf up from the filing cabinets. "Nothing but shitty weather for the next five months, I betcha a hundred bucks."*)

Hannibal, despite protestations of hating the cold weather, cuts a clean figure in his pea coat and lambskin black gloves. Will has admired them and their bottle green satin lining all evening, seeing them sit on the bar counter in a nice contrast to the copper top. A younger couple than them has beaten them to the leather chairs tonight which Hannibal accepts with a graceful dignity that Will is surprised by. Will, younger than Hannibal but certainly older than the college aged people in his usual seat, can barely handle the change in the routine without a frown.

“They began drinking earlier than us,” Hannibal muses with a twirl of a glass. “We can hardly begrudge them their efficiency.”

“No one’s more efficient than me at getting to the bottom of a bottle,” Will grouses good-naturedly, only half teasing.

“Not half as efficient as your father who cleared a handle of poor quality whiskey without blinking.”

“He blinked at least five times,” Will mutters. “He blinks when he’s frustrated, and you were in each other’s company for at least a couple of hours. Your crossword puzzle vocabulary would irritate him.”

Hannibal gives a cheers to that. “Then a compromise. He did not blink at the liquor, only the person who insisted on paying for it, only to be turned down on three separate occasions on the grounds that it should be a novelty for someone to pay for me for once.”

Will hums. “I’ve paid the tab here at least three times,” he says. “You may be some kind of renovation sugar daddy, but I settle my own drinks.”

“And what a lovely experience it is to be treated these days, almost exclusively delivered by men of your lineage,” Hannibal replies, straightening the cuffs of his shirt. No cufflinks like he would in Baltimore, but small silver and mother-of-pearl snap closures flash in the bar light.

“If you didn’t try to exclusively hang out with men of my lineage and kill everyone else, I’m sure you’d have a larger sample size.” Will takes a long swig, too much at one time, and has to fight back a cough as Hannibal gives a toothy grin.

By the time they leave, Will’s feeling warm and brave from the drinks as the front door swings closed behind them, even if his hands are feeling small and cold. Watching Hannibal favor his glass with the closeness that Will has jealously considered for the duration of the week makes him feel bolder. He would think it’s on purpose, but Hannibal handles all fine

things with a particular long fingered delicateness that makes Will weigh the possibility that he’s not any more special than an old glass of French liquor.

(*It takes the pressure off your shoulders. It also makes you feel particularly unremarkable for a man who acquaints himself with fine old things regularly.*)

Liquid courage or not, Will likes to think he’s at least somewhat subtle, breaking Hannibal’s unspoken personal space rule by getting as close as he can without it obstructing either’s walking. They go about half a block this way, Hannibal’s posture as perfect as ever though certainly Will is too close for it to have not been noticed. There’s a nasty breeze coming off the bay, but not enough of one to excuse sheltering that awkwardly nearby. Will almost thinks they're going to make it to their natural parting point in town with it unremarked on.

“Feeling bold tonight, Will?” Hannibal asks.

Ah, so they're having a conversation after all.

Will, despite being the instigator, feels a little embarrassed. “Maybe I’m just cold,” he says with a frown, but not leaving any more room than before.

"Unlikely," Hannibal replies dryly. "Invading personal space is the gravest of sins to you the majority of the time."

The logic is sound - despite enjoying the closeness, the forced nature of it does make Will feel like some kind of transgressor. So to the truth of the matter - he clears his throat. “I’m beginning to suspect that like many of the events in our acquaintance, you are waiting for me to react in some way," he says, biting at the corner of his chapped lip nervously. "I’ve had more than enough opportunities to make a fool of myself, so I think I'd prefer clearer terms to whatever this is, and why you went from attached to the hip to distant with me.”

Hannibal gives him a smile, something small and sickle-like in the sodium glow of the street lamps. “I figured you might need to reassert yourself without my complicating things,” he says in his accented drawl, like that explains everything. “I was beginning to suspect you

might just navel gaze for a few more weeks first than actually discuss it. It would follow your usual pattern."

This irritates Will, all the more for the assumption of his delicateness or lack of understanding himself. (*You understand yourself very well - you just don't like what you understand. There's a difference, see?*) Without thinking much about it, he stops and grabs Hannibal's arm, the felted wool soft against his cold-stung hand. He wants to squeeze until he can feel the threads of muscle shred. He wants to be warm like the memory of sharing hot breath.

"You always want me to reach the right conclusion without any risk to you. Always king of the hill," Will spits. "I'm tired of trying to correctly guess what you want. When is it your turn to feel the inconvenience of being vulnerable?"

Hannibal stands more rigidly than usual, sickle-smile sliding away, though his gaze is fixed on the hand on his arm, and his response more gentle than Will really expects. "I have it on good authority that events recently have been going my way more often than is warranted," Hannibal says with a huff, relaxing his shoulders. "You were concerned you couldn't tell the difference between deceit and affection - I thought it best that you decide for yourself how you feel without undue influence."

Will huffs a little, of half a mind to just drop Hannibal's arm from his hand and pretend he never reached for it at all. "That sounds like a rarified way to say that you want to see what I do when left to my own devices. Sounds like more of your recent self- discovery bullshit than a declaration of continued interest."

"Think of it as an opportunity to know your own mind," Hannibal replies, like he's imparting sage wisdom, or a medical diagnosis. "It's your decision where this goes next, if anywhere," he says, pulling back, his breath a cloud of white in the glow of the streetlights. "It can be nothing more than a one-time irregular Sunday night of poor sleep if that is what you wish."

Will frowns, feeling naked. "Is that what *you* want?"

Hannibal sighs, curling steam a halo on either side of his head, thinking longer than Will thought the question really merited. Will can't really see his eyes in the shadows of his face, only feel the certainty of them on him. "I wish for your company," he says. "Against reason,

for the time being, on both of our accounts I think. What shape that company takes is, how you say, in your court."

And with that, he slides his arm slowly away until he can take the skin between Will's coat and cold fist in hand, feeling the fine bones of Will's wrist underneath the cuff of his shirt. The pointed styloid process of the ulna, sensitive and prominent, is given a particular affectionate reverence, passing his thumb over it in circles. (*You think he'd make something of yours when you die someday - maybe whittle it into a bone knife, or a fountain pen. A sharp thing to keep close in remembrance, as you are a sharp thing now.*)

Will pulls his arm back before he catches Hannibal's hand in his own, silky with the lambskin glove over it, cold as his own. He squeezes, unsure if he wants to grind the small bones of Hannibal's hand together until they hurt, or if he wants to weave their fingers together. A small gesture he can't remember experiencing, but finds that he wants it. The liquor is starting to fade. He's feeling less brave.

"Good night, Hannibal," Will says quietly, clasping fingers before letting Hannibal's hand go. "Until tomorrow."

It's a rare afternoon that Will gets to himself this week, with Hannibal dipping in and out of the house with increasing regularity. He was never exactly far away since arriving in the whiskey bar over a month ago, but with the extra assurance that Will is running out of home projects that could potentially damage his spine, a kitchen wish list to write, and without an outright rejection of his desire to be close by, he's like a neighborhood kid that won't stop showing up in his backyard. Will rolls his eyes at the unwanted suggestions, fixation on schedule setting, and perpetual teasing, but does nothing to discourage him.

(*Even you can admit to your own affection. It's tempered with something angry, but it's still rooted in something loving that recognizes Hannibal as akin to you.*)

Hannibal doesn't really change much about himself, happy to continue to pester, and poke, and disappear off to the south coast during the day like it's his personal hobby and not just a way to pass time between the working hours. Will doesn't hear about any exotic looking

homicides or missing persons cases, so unless he's going *really* out of his way to not be caught at it, the Chesapeake Ripper doesn't seem to be pursuing the title of Columbia Ripper.

They continue to ignore the readiness of the kitchen in Will's house, and go out at night for dinner. People start to recognize them together, either on walks with the dogs or forays into town, compromising on food. Lori starts to ask about that European guy he's seen with during the evenings, and Will begins to struggle to know how to refer to Hannibal other than "the guy he's working on the house with" or "asshole investor with unexpected stake in the property and owner".

They're not really in a relationship - not by the recognizable definition of the word to the average person, anyway. Looking at them from the outside and how they take shots at each other, they probably look like old friends with bad blood. It's not inaccurate. If any of this bothers Hannibal, it's not visible to Will. But Will can't *quite* stop thinking about it, and what that would mean.

Working today to replace the faceplates of the wall switches and install a stronger range hood over his ill-gifted black stove, Will has some time to do more constructive thinking that he usually does. Late night thinking doesn't count - he is genetically predisposed to misery and matching the misery with miserable drinking after 10pm. Other than successfully getting laid for the first time in well over two years recently (*and not for lack of trying to ruin it with the reality of their situation*), no good thoughts happen late at night. Watching his hands assemble and align the wall mount for the electric vent, productive for the time being, now seems as safe as it gets to contemplate what he wants to do next.

Disaster isn't Will's middle name, but it follows him as persistently as a title. It's not anything that he's done *personally* - it just turns out that the cosmos has a bone to pick with people who wield truth like a blunt force instrument. Today's truth is that Will is certain that everything will be ruined if he tries to fit this thing they have in a tidy box.

He's had the better part of a year to build up his little life in Astoria, from the boat to the house to the job and limited social circle from the job. He has friends the way that Beau Graham had friends - people that move in the same circles and can laugh at some of the same jokes and cut up about the guy who comes into the shop on a Tuesday like he owns the place. Will hasn't made himself an irreplaceable figure of the community, but when has he ever? That was never the point. The most important element is that he is walking around in his own skin, doing methodical tasks that he's good at, and don't harm him to do. While there's at least one prolific serial killer wandering the northwest coast of Oregon in high-end outdoors gear that he might be responsible for, Will doesn't know about any others, so that's a massive

relief, assuming that he himself doesn't develop into one. (*That part isn't a massive relief, but instead a persistent fear. You are not a good creature, growing comfortable in the company of another like you.*)

Following their last late-night conversation, he has somehow unwittingly fallen into an unspoken domestic... relationship? Truce? (*Mistake?*) Whatever you call it when two malignant forces come together and sit in relatively comfortable symbiosis, as long as the temperature, humidity, and biology of the surrounding tissues remain unchanged. He has that with Hannibal. It's terrifying, because he doesn't know how he's supposed to progress it from here. He has yet to successfully hold an intimate relationship down at any phase of his life, much less one commanded in part by a serial killing psychiatrist, which could not have been a more perfect combination of Things Will Generally Doesn't Like.

Hannibal is not in the habit of telling Will things he doesn't want to hear over the last few days, perhaps happy that Will is not going out of his way to injure his person, or maybe satisfied with his opportunities passing hands through Will's hair thoughtfully and deliberately when he thinks he can get away with it. Maybe he's worried a snide comment will revoke the privilege. It's gratifying to have a stray like Will accept touch. It's only twice now that he's tried, and Will can't even muster the protest to move away from it, enjoying each curl snagging. It's the only thing Hannibal does that represents any sort of substantial change since their night together, and it's hardly anything. Will supposes he's more patient, and less inclined to stir up dark things that Will isn't in the mood to stir.

The prophesized living room couch from weeks ago appears on a Wednesday, something tufted and velvet and incredibly nice, probably nicer than anything Will has in the house, stupid black stove and rug included. When he comes home to it sitting dark and soft in the evening light, Hannibal all but looks like it's Christmas Day, gratified by the first piece of "adult" furniture in the space. Will immediately protests its existence, and suggests Hannibal throw money at some sort of foundling's charity.

"In the spirit of sympathy?" asks Hannibal. "I'd rather have the couch."

"In the spirit of practicality," complains Will. "There's going to be dog hair all over it by the end of the week."

It's also apparently gratifying for Hannibal to sneak higher quality jars of herbs and spices into the cabinets like Will doesn't see him doing it. Will said no kitchenware - he never said

no food. It's the kind of deception and rule bending that normal people do, and it's nice to see it.

"You aren't 'normal people'," says Freddie from the corner of the kitchen, greyer than her usual appearance. The hair is still fire bright, and the blue eyes still gleam condescending flashes of annoyance. "Hard to imagine what normal even looks like for you."

Will rubs his head, where the sharp pain of a headache is building after staring into the stove vent light. "I don't know what it looks like either," he says, and adjusts the vent until it feels like it's locked in place. She watches him from her corner long after he's done, and doesn't leave until Hannibal comes in and Will can't be bothered to watch her any longer himself.

"You've not fished for me before," Hannibal says on Friday, head leaned back, gazing up at the mounted elk head.

"If you mean literal fish with a reel, yes," Will says in return, admiring his drink from the comfort of the leather armchair. No stupid college kids sitting in his space tonight, he thinks with some grouchy old man that looks like him in 20 years in mind. It looks remarkably like Beau. "If you mean fish for information, specific verbal responses to your own byzantine questions, or some semblance of human regret or response, I have thrown as much bait at you as I can without losing the whole kit, boat, and reel."

Hannibal doesn't snort, but it's a near thing. He's obviously spending too much time with Will. "I'm not interested in emotional bait, I'm interested in literal fish."

Will smiles. "Didn't take it for your kind of game. Always thought you're more of a red meat kind of guy than a pescaterian. Goes more with the Saint Paul vibe you think I have than the indulgent Franz Ferdinand one that you do." Will takes another drink, watching Hannibal's throat which is exposed and warm-looking in the dim bar light. "What do you have in mind?"

"Salmon, if it's not too late. Or too early. You're the angler between the two of us - I'm just here to hold all the higher learning scholastic degrees, as you like to point out."

Will rolls his eyes. “Still on the Russian food, or thinking something more Pacific?" He gives it some thought - not impossible. "Better have a backup plan. It’s a bit late in the season, but there’s a chance. I might have to get the waders out.” He’s a good fisherman, but it’s a big bay, nature has its own rules, and the weather will be terrible. If there’s any sort of cosmic justice, Hannibal is not entitled to a late season salmon catch, even if it does mean Will has to waste some hours in the bay to fail at it.

Hannibal smiles, unbothered. “Then we will leave it to your patience and to fate to decide when your kitchen is christened.”

“My kill or nothing?” Will asks with a wry smile.

“Something like that,” says Hannibal, as serious as a storm.

It’s not often, hardly ever, but once in a while Will gets the smallest look into how Hannibal emotionally responds and thinks. When it comes to Will himself, he is controlled, but kind and funny in his overblown dramatic way. Everything can be an affectionate joke, or a smouldering coal, full of moral implications or vaguely sexual innuendos. (*This rattles your cage bars - your one night of reprieve together has been exactly that - one night, though were you to ask Hannibal, that’s your own failing. Every tease otherwise brings a strange warmth to your face, and a persistent ache for the closeness that you don’t dare ask for, but always unfurl like a flower in the sun when you receive it.*)

But other people? It’s sometimes clear that Hannibal doesn’t see other people as people at all.

They’re in the post office, Hannibal arguing in a polite but forceful way about his undelivered shipment with a clerk that would surely know if a giant bureau had or had not arrived. Hannibal has ideas about storing coats - as Will has a grand total of two coats, one for wet weather and one for cold, both of which he is perfectly happy to throw onto the back of a chair until he needs it, and layer them together if necessary, this is distinctly Hannibal’s hill to

die on. The unfortunate reality, as Will is beginning to discover, is that this may be a hill that Hannibal is willing to die on.

Hannibal has a look in his face that Will isn't entirely sure he's familiar with. He's had his head somewhere else, only half listening from the side of the office. (*Of course you don't stand next to him; how telling would that be, running errands together?*) It's an alien voice, cold, crisply polite. He starts the conversation with the postal clerk pleasantly, but has taken a saccharine tone that tastes off. Everything she says is met with chilly condescension said so nicely that Will knows she doesn't recognize it for what it is - a warning, like a viper's rattle. They go on like this for 10 minutes, Hannibal ferreting out tiny minutiae of the postal office process, customer service, and lack thereof.

"So you mean to say that out of the three people working this counter, no one has seen a freight truck deliver a box the size of a small vehicle that would have arrived less than 12 hours ago." He pauses, statue still. "That was then again returned here. And that there's absolutely nothing you can do to be of assistance."

The postal clerk, a middle aged woman named Christine, has the tired look of most publicly facing government employees. "I don't keep track of every box that comes through here, sir. If the delivery slip said they'd reattempt delivery, you'll just have to wait for the truck to come back by, or leave the response card to have them leave it unattended."

This is clearly not what Hannibal wants to hear, if the flat expression on his face is anything to go by.

"Madam," he says, "with all due respect, and as I said, I am in the delivery address for several hours at a time. No such attempted delivery has come to pass."

"Well you have a slip, don't you? Maybe you weren't listening." Like now, she implies.

Hannibal smiles, something drawn on, because not smiling would be more unnerving and Hannibal must do nothing to disturb prey ahead of its due time. "I suppose I'll just have to listen harder then." There is no smile in his voice, and the contrast makes Will's stomach turn. It's so rare that Hannibal is anything but the soul of patience with him - he wonders if he retained that same warmth with Beverly, a person he knew and respected in some way, or if

this cold hateful thing that is rising up from a municipal office lobby is that face he couldn't see for months.

(*"You said you just interpret the evidence. So interpret the evidence."*)

Will tries to not be bothered, but he is. Forewarned is forearmed, and he knows exactly the kind of sins that Hannibal likes to commit. The problem is Hannibal has the patience of a cliff-face - all is well until the stone at last gives way. Will knows he'll have to address it later before he can do something to jeopardize their stay in town, but does he even have that kind of influence on Hannibal? Would he take the advice as a threat, or like having an afternoon hobby turned down?

"Not worth it," he says around the lump in his throat when they get into the car.

Hannibal is staring straight ahead when he turns the keys in the ignition, still not fully stitched back into what makes him safe for public spaces. "It was a very fine bureau. It's worth it to me to see that it arrives."

"Not what I mean," Will sighs, and makes a note that he may need to watch closer. They say the people you're closest to are the ones you expect violence from the least, but Will has two degrees and a year's worth of experience that now say otherwise.

"I know what you mean," says Hannibal, and speaks no further on the subject.

It's a bright day, but the water is dark.

He's 7 years old again, skinned knees and burned cheeks on the creaking planks of the docks. The Biloxi River is a brackish brown-green body past all the white and aluminum boat hulls, estuary grass choking sand banks and little creeks that join with it. It's sweltering hot, and his

nose is full of diesel fumes. He thinks there was a crane on the sandbank that day, red crowned and white. They were supposed to go bass fishing.

Five steps ahead, Beau's hand is a mass of red, bony fist.

Beau's not a big man, more shoulder blade than muscle, more wiry tendons than strength, more venom than force, but at his feet, the dockyard owner looks small. He's clutching at his nose and trying his best to breathe around the blood filtering down his face and from his mouth. The memory is persistent.

(" *Yes daddy, I remember."*)

Adult wit overtakes the actual confusion he feels as a child. He had admired his father at the time, proud in a way that doesn't get chased off until he's well into his teen years and understands this isn't a one-off event for Beau - this is a pattern of violence. Will had been so flattered by the defense, by the sound of cartilage cracking and Beau spitting on the dried greying wood. Will has almost 30 years to decide how to feel about it as law enforcement and criminal profiling overtakes youthful naivete. It's not a respectable picture.

(*You love your daddy. Standing in the echo of this picture, removed from the righteousness of your education and your past profession, you still love your daddy.*)

"Second verse, same as the first," he hears next to his head, sing-song and bitter. "At least you know where you get it from."

When he turns, Freddie is there, all dressed in acid green, watching between the two of them. Her cheekbones and mouth are burned with concrete, blistering and black. Her tongue is still red and sharp from behind her teeth.

She hums. "Don't know if you wear it as well as him though."

"Why's that?" Will asks.

(*She must be wrong. Your life is a study in trying to not do what you see.*)

“Confidence,” she says with a beauty queen’s wave. “Daddy wears it like a flower in a button-hole. You look awkward. You look like you make the mistake of being sorry about it later,” she says, and a Southern accent fits her like cling-wrap. It sticks right, feels wrong. “Would have preferred it if you could wear me like a badge if you’re going to leave me in an unremarkable hole in the ground,” she sneers.

Will looks down, skinned knees still blushed with the force of a fall. It’s hard to look at the contusions on her face. He put them there, not in this child’s body, but not by his own hand, and something about that is uncomfortable. Ahead of them, Beau wipes at the sweat on his forehead, and streaks the dockyard owner’s blood with the casualness of grease.

When Will looks up, Freddie is too close, the way the spanner wrench is too close, or the way Hannibal is too close and Will can count the grey hairs that edge his ears like filaments. With all the force in her stick-thin body, she heaves him off the docks into the murky green river behind him where he falls to the bottom like a stone.

Will wakes up, trying not to scramble against the oppressive whiteness of the ceiling.

He gasps in the cold air, hair wet with sweat. The air mattress, only slightly deflated, feels like floating on surface tension, waiting for the water beneath to swallow him. If he can just hold still, he can keep his equilibrium until morning.

When it feels safe to move, he passes time counting pill doses and drinking glasses of water, like it can chase the chill out of him. Everything is correct - little tablets in the correct quantities, codes pressed into yellow powder in their correct dosages. There’s nothing to blame bad dreams on except himself.

“Trouble sleeping?” Hannibal asks, handing him a coffee.

“I think everything about my life is troubling,” says Will, eyes ringed like a raccoon’s. “Wouldn’t you?”

Hannibal smiles.

“An exciting life, then,” he says with more energy than any human has a right to have this early in the morning.

Will thanks him for the coffee with a grey face and a seasick walk to the docks. He’s stopped with a careful hand to the elbow between street lights. Hannibal gives him a strange, long look when he jumps onto the boat, like he’d like to protest, but does nothing. Will, in a strange vulnerable mood, wishes he would. He wishes he could go back home and sleep on the floor with the blankets and the shoulder pain and his on-and-off again companion, as close as they’ve ever been, dogs nosing at his neck, bad decisions held at bay by a not quite risen sun.

The day feels different, and the quiet sounds of the river meeting the delta don’t soothe him both to and from the shop. Each gull he passes is alien and yellow-eyed, carnivorous and mean in a way that he previously respected but now feels too close a kinship to. There’s no sun to be seen today, with a thick grey sea layer that hides the ports from each other, Warrenton and Astoria hidden in the mist. It’s a good day to run aground on a shoal, or listen for seals and sea lions he can’t see and pretend he’s not feeling off-kilter.

He feels itchy, and instead of going home at the end of office hours, he goes out on his little boat into the mouth of the Columbia, mindful of the shoals. (*You think it’s named for Desdemona, that sad beaten wife of Othello - “And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then, when your eyes roll so: why I should fear I know not…”*) The tide is too low to go out to the Pacific itself, but the warbling over the radio of the Coast Guard calling in weather reports and wind conditions lulls him into a restfulness that he’s lacked all day.

Bobbing on the surface of the sea, cormorants folded into tidy black feathered packages on the foamy water on either side of him and the green of the bridge in the distance, Will drops

anchor, and simply listens to the hollows around him.

A small buzz - his phone receiving a text message. When he unlocks the screen, Winston and Buster anxiously sit on the floor of the kitchen, a piece of boiled shrimp with glaze proffered before them like they've never seen food before. Will smiles dully. ***I was met with some enthusiasm at the door*** , writes Hannibal.

Isn't he always, despite all warnings to the contrary?

Consider this question he's been posed with before, that he feels even now looking at this small photo of the man in his house, feeding his dogs his lunch leftovers: is Hannibal safe for him? Alana had asked him the same, and Will had blithely ignored how it affected him, focused instead on how asinine the question was. (*Of course you say no, of course he isn't.*) He's traveled across the country to get away from him, from all of them, and still Hannibal is at his doorway, punctured into the skin of his collarbones and into his day with a morning cup of coffee. He doesn't know if he'll ever be able to wash him out.

Still, Will can't shake the feeling of waiting for something. Is it Hannibal that's waiting for him to change, or is it Will waiting for Hannibal to become something other than what he is? (*Let's enumerate his many and abundant titles; doctor, friend, colleague, cannibal, serial killer, charlatan, thief.*) If Hannibal's looking for Will to kill someone, it's already done - he never admits to it out loud, but they both know. Will, unexpectedly, is feeling more unsettled by this months after the fact. It would almost be a relief to just tell him outright and take that policy of honesty he's rolling with to its most extreme.

Everyone knows everybody here. While no one rats Will out to the police, everyone knows he's violently lost his temper with an out-of-towner before. They know he slept in his boat for a month, and showered in the aquatics center. They know he won't ask for money if asked to look at a car, and that he's friendly with dogs both on the street and behind fences. The clerk at the liquor store knows he drinks often. The staff at the hardware store knows he's particular about using nails over screws. He doesn't think he could plant a rose bush without someone commenting on it. The only reason they don't know he's medicated, a murderer of convenience, and a potential threat to society is very careful editing on Will's part.

(*You have to show some kind of nastiness, otherwise they'll start looking for it.*)

If Hannibal knows about this in full, that's it, game over. If he ever decides to do another round of trying to pin his sins on Will, no matter how earnestly or lovingly done, Will finds himself in the uncomfortable position of knowingly committing second-degree murder. Hannibal had all the pieces to free Will from prison if and when he changed his mind before, but Freddie is an act of Will's own ugliness that will be hard for him to be exonerated for if he's ever caught for it. There's no good way to disappear if Jack comes sniffing, or old rivalries come to surface in unattractive digital print. There's only so many times he can stop and start his life again. He's not his father, for all that he is a product of him.

Hannibal isn't safe for Will at all.

But looking at his phone, and the wet black noses standing at attention, in the kitchen that has been methodically shaped to Hannibal's taste, next to the living room that has been made different by the desire to be close, even if for a night, Will knows he's taking the dice in his hands again. He's been burnt once, but not forgotten the warmth of it, and that's the unsafe part.

Will can't know what Hannibal will do. Will doesn't think Hannibal knows what he will do until faced with the decision, like his decision to cover Abigail's murder of Nick Boyle, or the moment he marks someone for death in some unspecified future, only knowing that their lack of politesse. Hannibal is only constant in his fluidity, and that feels new and comfortable and like the scabs on his chest catching on the fabric of his shirt. (*You never do clean them, doctor's orders or no.*)

Tapping the phone screen with numb fingers, Will apologizes once for being late, and thanks Hannibal for swinging by the house. He floats in the bay until the sun goes down. He waits for the peace of the roughened sea to shake the tiredness from his head.

He's so afraid the bottom is going to drop out of this, and he's going to be alone again, or in a prison cell because a man who kills as God does won't likely ever stop. Who tells God to stop?

He also feels he has to risk it, or it will chafe at him until all he has is questions and no answers to fill in the blanks. The half of Hannibal that isn't an unknowable granite pluton makes Will happy. It's hard to reconcile what giving that up means.

God damn it.

When he docks the boat and stumbles his way onto land with his sea legs, he has two messages from Hannibal:

I've walked the dogs and seen to their meal. Only a small amount of shrimp tonight.

Take your time.

Even with his restless mood, Will feels seen, and awkwardly appreciative.

He walks the main street and the hills of the neighborhood until the air is misty and damp. The chill of it feels great on his neck. He takes the long way home for the sake of regaining his footing. When he returns to the house, the new sconces are warm and glowing from the windows. Hannibal isn't there, though both dogs look cozy and happy on the couch where a fleece blanket has been laid out to stop the worst of the dog hair from sticking to the velvet.

Will pours himself a glass of whiskey and calls his daddy, playing at casual on the phone while his old man tells him about the annual marathon through Savannah and bitches about the traffic and people crowding his bar. He makes the right sounds at the right points in conversation, and wonders what Hannibal is doing.

(*Everyone you love is problematic, and that's not as problematic as it should be.*)

Another week passes, with Hannibal at the cottage more often than not. Hannibal isn't shy about placing hands on him or taking greater liberties than he used to, though they are all

taken witht he casualness of an afternoon stroll. Will thinks about it now and then, often getting flustered when Hannibal just watches and smiles his inscrutable statuesque smile.

They're sitting on the porch, taking in a chilly autumn sunset on the river, half obscured by spruce branches. To the left, the Japanese maple is furiously yellow and red, Hannibal angled towards it admiringly. On his lap, carefully separated from his dress trousers, Buster sits atop the grey fleece blanket.

While Winston is ever the stalwart companion, a streak of russet brown at his feet, Will can't help but notice Buster has started to prefer sitting on the porch with Hannibal over Will. Hannibal, sitting in his chair, lets the small terrier wedge between his leg and the armrest, balancing his tiny snout on the edge of a trouser leg like he belongs there. Hannibal does nothing to encourage him, but he also does nothing to make him feel unwelcome. The blanket is as good as an invitation, even if it was meant to be practical.

"Do you think he has a particular attraction to clothing that his shedding hair will catch on?" asks Hannibal, looking down at the small dog with the imperious head tilt of a lord overlooking the peasants. The dog merely sighs.

"You give him food he shouldn't eat - of course he wants to sit with you," says Will, scratching behind Winston's ears and eying Buster who's eyes glint wetly from over the rise of Hannibal's knee. "Dogs can be loyal, but they certainly aren't without strategy, simple as it may be."

Hannibal, watching Will's hand, frowns a little. (*Jealously? Surely not.*) "Winston remains suspicious, no matter the appetizer before dinner."

Will shrugs, and turns the mug in his hand. With an ache in his head from a day of work and glaring into the autumn sun, it's a night for remedies. He's taken a note out from Lawrence tonight, with hot toddies made a little too strong, and a meyer lemon that Hannibal had kept at the rental flat in anticipation of making tarts that would likely go uneaten. Will wonders if Hannibal ever gets tired of wasting his morning pastries on Will and the avian population of the bay, albeit he doesn't know that , or if he's made some unassuming local contacts that take them when Will refuses. At some point, Will thinks he might not refuse.

“Winston’s a suspicious dog,” Will tries to explain, running thumbs down Winston’s snout to try and clear the tracks of tear stains there. Ever patient, Winston closes his eyes and lets him do it without complaint. “I suspect he was probably beaten before he came to live with me - skinny and dirty and cold on the road. He’s still wary even of me some days.” (*Smart dog.*)

“Animals have surprising emotional acuity. It’s one of the primary reasons dogs make such good companions beyond their herding and hunting abilities. They are attuned to respond to your need.” Hannibal absently scratches at Buster’s head with blunt fingernails, running the tips along the soft hairs that sit between his skull and the fold of his ears, puppy soft even now as a senior dog. Will has always liked how velvety they are despite his wiry coarse hair elsewhere. It’s unsurprising a hedonist like Hannibal would favor it.

“You have a particular kinship with these two,” Hannibal continues. “You’ve picked your shyest and boldest dogs to bear witness to your new life, the parallel of yourself in the face of trauma.”

“Trauma that you caused,” Will replies blandly. Sometimes he really can’t fathom the confidence Hannibal has in his statements. He’d make an amazing politician.

Hannibal shrugs off the accusation, smiling softly and still scratching at Buster’s head. “Always the rebuttal waiting at hand,” he sighs. “If it pleases you to hear it out loud, I will take the lion’s share of blame for recent events.” Will is surprised to be pleased by it, even as he bristles at Hannibal’s off-handed confession. It's still not an apology. “However, you can’t ignore the role that other elements of your life played. I *am* a psychiatrist, and I can assure you there were problems before I arrived, and probably continuing problems had I never arrived at all.”

“Such as?” Will prods, not entirely sure he wants to hear it.

“Depression, intrusive thoughts, excessive use of depressants and poor sleep schedule, a verbally abusive superior, and a lack of a support system to cope with all of the listed, just to name a few.”

When it’s all listed out like that, it’s hard to disagree. Will feels himself frowning into his drink. “It’s why it was easy to take advantage of me,” he says after a moment’s time to consider.

Hannibal shakes his head, turning his own mug in hand. It’s another thrift store find, something with a Tillamook cheese logo on it. Will hadn’t thought much about it other than it being 50 cents. In Hannibal’s hands, it looks like a gift from a poor relative. Maybe Will looks like that in his company too.

“Arguably, it’s why it was more difficult,” Hannibal finally says. “You were aware of all these faults and resigned to live with them, because you have adopted them as features of your personality. Therapy only works if you want it to, and you didn’t want to need a therapist above all else in your situation.”

“Nobody really wants to change,” Will says, and it’s just miles of empty road in his head, wishing he could go back home. “They just do.”

“I’d hardly say they just do,” says Hannibal, putting his mug down on the arm of his chair. “My experience is that people don’t change without external forces. You prune a rose in autumn to make it bloom more beautifully in the spring. Growth requires stimulation.”

“Rose, thou art sick,” says Will, with a hand wave, half lidded eyes taking in the river.

Hannibal hums again in recognition, leaning forward with a curious gleam in his eyes, something molten. “Blake does seem to have a rather bleak outlook on carnality, but isn't it vivid how he weaves the vision? 'The invisible worm, that flies in the night,'” continues Hannibal for him, rising from his chair on the porch. Will turns to him, watching as he’s very careful when moving the dog from his lap to the decking of the porch. He moves to kneel before Will, leaning into his space until there's hardly anything to call space between them.

“'In the howling storm, has found out thy bed, of crimson joy,'” he whispers, petting down the lapels of Will’s wool house coat pulled over his work shirt. Will shivers at the change.

Hannibal leans in, runs his teeth along the edge of his face, up his ear, mouthing back down at the small curls behind it. “'And his dark secret love, does thy life destroy.'”

For a moment they just breathe each other's air.

Will wants to be bothered by this, the constant reminders that Hannibal isn't a tame house pet. Another animal with loyalty, but not without strategy. Mostly, he's thrilled at the implication of Hannibal's attention again, not a one time curiosity satisfied by a late night rest on his living room floor. Will tries to push the feeling aside, arousal pulling at the pit of his stomach.

"You have a lot more in common with Buster and Winston than you'd like to think, fancy leather brogues and cured meats aside," he says, sighing a little at the warm breath on his ear. His heartbeat is humiliatingly fast. He can feel it thrumming against Hannibal's mouth.

There's the smallest gust of air, just a little laugh. Someday, Will would like to hear Hannibal's laugh in full, something unguarded. "You care for Buster and Winston, certainly more than anyone back in Virginia or Quantico," says Hannibal. "You took them across the entire continent to start your new life with them. I consider them the finest company to keep, predatory self-serving animals that we are."

Will huffs a little laugh of his own, feeling shaken. "This is a pretty public porch for displays of self-serving animal intention, if that's where we're trending."

"Are we trending that way?" asks Hannibal, all grasping hands that slide up Will's sides with a digging strength, like he means to bury each finger between a rib. Will finds himself bringing his own hands up to grasp at a shoulder and pull at the ashen hair in front of him, nodding.

(*In one breath he calls you unstable and in another he calls you a rose. Isn't that a lovely picture of the two of you, all wound around each other with thorns? He might be crazy enough to actually love you, strange thing that you are.*)

Hannibal wastes no time, directing Will into the house as the aggressor with the glide of hands and teeth and careful navigation through the noisy patio door until their legs meet with the edge of the new couch, a pool of darkness where Will feels pale and important as a jewel in a box. Maybe that was always the intention. It's particularly fetching with the Turkish rug that still dominates the room with bold pattern and memory that Hannibal seems intent to varnish into the very grain of every plank of the house.

“Are you going to keep telling me things I don’t like and should probably disagree with as foreplay?” Will sighs into Hannibal’s shoulder, chilled from the evening air but warm the longer he leaves his cheek on it. His house coat has been cast aside, as has every other garment of note, socks and all. It’s dark enough outside that he doesn’t worry about the neighbors. “Because that shit is going to get old real quick.”

“It seems to be working out so far, but I’ll keep your comments on record for consideration when then next opportunity comes about,” Hannibal says, petting down the hair at Will’s neck, sliding a hand down the bumps of his spine, fingers tracing the soft skin of the back of his thighs. “I prefer to keep business and pleasure close to each other, lest one becomes bored with either and need something to turn to.”

“Maybe try saying something flattering next time,” Will snorts.

“Try being open to being flattered,” says Hannibal with a smile. “While I enjoy a good open conversation as much as the next academic, I was only trying to complement you and your dogs.”

“I think you called yourself a dog,” Will laughs, tired but comfortable and so very ready to stop thinking darkly this month, this year, this lifetime. The exhaustion in his bones has slinked away with the headache. Being cozy helps - the couch is a substantial improvement over the pile of blankets, though Will does wish there was something a little more...Will about it. Maybe an ugly decorative throw pillow, or a stain on the arm of it from coffee, or a little more dog hair. He supposes he has time to wear it in, even if Hannibal did get the first marks in. (*And how you’ll ever get the olive oil from the ill-gotten spice cabinet out of the upholstery is a problem for Hannibal, not you.*) “There’s a lot of skeletons in the closet. I suppose it’s not conducive to foreplay to drag them out on a moment’s notice.”

“Either that, or you like talking about them more than you like to admit, psychiatry tricks and all,” teases Hannibal, laying a searing kiss to his throat, worrying the skin of it up until he reaches his ear and his mouth. He thinks he should be afraid of Hannibal’s teeth, white and sharp from harrowing bones between them as the dogs do. Instead, he feels grounded by them.

Chapter End Notes

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I'll leave the misuse of the kitchen condiments to your imaginations.

Things are moving a bit slower at this point in the outline, as chapters are like 50% written, but are missing tie-ins from other areas, so unfortunately it takes more time to write and edit to completion. I've got a Murder Husbands Big Bang to get cracking on, so hopefully we can wrap this up in good time. Thanks for your patience!

act 4 - livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth

Will's been living in a relative bubble since Hannibal arrived. It's kaleidoscopic, and warps his perception of everything it touches. It's not deliberate - Hannibal just happens to have the gravity of a supermassive black hole, and Will, for all that he has a smattering of friends and acquaintances in this new place, has to admit that he can't look away from the disaster renting the loft down the street.

This suits Hannibal fine, who doesn't discourage Will from having a life outside of their time together, but would likely be fine if Will never went to work or ran a single errand outside of his purview. He's always ready in the morning to walk to the docks, and always back again in the afternoon, sometimes with the dogs, and sometimes with an off-handed argument to start.

(*"Why Astoria instead of Seattle, or Vancouver, or Sitka?" he asks you one day, with the expectation that you fall in step even as he hands off the morning coffee, cupping your hand to steady the travel mug. "Because I was tired of driving," you reply, and admire the decaying pier posts in the water nearby. It's not much of an answer, and for all that he tries to get a different one on different days that week, like he's merely asked the question incorrectly, you don't really have another one to offer. You were tired. Astoria was fine. It wasn't near Baltimore. There was no Hannibal here at the time, and that was a good thing.*)

Will is tempted to give Hannibal the full run of the house renovation, if only to keep him busy a while longer. Hannibal proves daily that he has compulsions but extreme patience - the hasty dropping of a water glass onto a restaurant table makes his mouth twitch down in an ominous fall. The Ford truck with the raised bed cuts Hannibal off in traffic on the way to Warrenton - this triggers a tight smile, clenched hands, the trace of his honey-warm eyes over the license plate. Will knows what he sees, and he does his best to distract with mundanities. Points out other things to focus on. It's very Southern of him. They both know exactly what he's doing.

Observances aside, Will's desire to not make waves seems like it's been enough to push the Ripper into another temporary sabbatical, but every finished project feels to Will like a day closer to Hannibal's benign placidness turning into something curious and dark again. Every day an opportunity to return to a shopping list left in a drawer somewhere. It's laughable that a man like Hannibal with multiple fields of education, language, cuisine, and music at his disposal is fully utilized when playing house this way. No performances, or underhanded games, or even simple social indulgences to sharpen his wit against other than Will's. Hannibal allows himself to be distracted with idle chatter about the local historical heroes,

what happened at the shop, how he's considered getting another dog to keep Winston and Buster happy.

By his own admission, Hannibal is rather like a large dog, and maybe that's the problem - Will treats him like a solution the same way because Hannibal is pretending to be a friendly, loving household pet when he's something... other. Unchallenged and intelligent animals are destructive without an enriched environment - they like to bite and tear. Will is not stupid enough to think the four to six hours of his company he offers a day will be sufficient to cull whatever's swimming in *that* skull behind the pleasantries and verbal rapport. He's also not stupid enough to mistake Hannibal for anything but a very, very clever animal.

Simple things that Hannibal does:

Baking for an unappreciative audience. Walking alone and with the appreciative audience of the dogs when Will is gone, and sometimes in each other's company. (*You are shy of this - it's almost more intimate than fucking, being in step and taking in the rise of the hill and the autumn air together. One feels good, the other feels well lived in, and you're not prepared for how that feels.*) Trips into Seaside and Cannon Beach for work and for the occasional supplies. Trips to Portland for his own cooking wares, and the occasional lunch meeting. (*Hannibal assures you he does in fact know people at Oregon Health & Science University, and has discussed doing lectures or the occasional consult. Something about ongoing education for maintaining his licenses. You just want to walk into his theoretical lecture hall and shout "I wouldn't listen to him if I were you - you never know if you're going to get to be one of his 1 in 20 bad outcomes!"*) Surprising aptitude for cutting and properly joining chair rails and crown moulding. Creating theoretical layouts and modifications for the upstairs bedrooms. Trying to talk Will into letting him buy a small La Marzocco espresso machine to install on the counter, even though it would take up half the counter. Can Hannibal really not think of better uses for the counter?

(*You suppose there wouldn't really be enough room for anyone to get properly bent over it and wow, where is this coming from? Are you twelve? Are you really that easily persuaded by physical affection to forget things?*)

(*Yes. Sometimes.*)

A surprising discovery for Will, however, is even with that laundry list of errands in his week, Hannibal is perfectly content to zone out on the couch, on a bar stool in the kitchen, on

the deck chairs between bouts of drizzly rain. “Revisiting places,” the older man explains, like he’s just come back from a favorite town in Ibiza rather than gazed mostly emptily into the branches of the spruce in the front yard. “Building new ones as well. It’s best to mind my memories as a librarian minds books.”

“With a bad attitude about the Dewey Decimal System in place of the BISAC system?” Will pokes, running his fingers over the porch railing, checking the sealant for problems following a downpour.

“Like they are valuable, and have use, even if every tome can’t be an epic.”

“Do you ever listen to yourself?” Will asks, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, all the time,” says Hannibal. “But recently I have been trying out listening to you instead. It appears I get into all sorts of trouble when I listen to myself.”

And that’s a new level of pressure Will is not acquainted with. He laughs it off, and hides his anxiety behind checking the exterior sills around the living room windows. He pets the dogs. He lets himself be pulled into warm embraces, callused fingers that aren’t his own tracing every hollow and rise of his neck and skull, pulling at his hair that he really should tie back to remove the temptation.

Edmund Ferris is loathsome, and does not seem to be too interested in stopping that anytime soon. He’s loathsome about bringing his purchase order forms, he’s loathsome about returning the invoices, he’s loathsome about treating Lori like she’s just a twit (*which really you know is a replacement for a* woman), he’s loathsome about treating Frank and Will like they’re always just about to mess up something despite consistently bringing work to them instead of some of the other local shops.

Frank claims that he has a sweetheart deal for Fish & Game because he likes one of the commissioners, and while he’d like to put his foot clear up Ferris’ ass, he prefers to maintain

the sweetheart deal in the name of year round business. Fair enough - Will has dealt with far worse at the FBI, in the name of upholding reputation and closing numbers.

Between repairs for the Hatcheries and the State Department rangers, Will mostly has learned to treat Ferris like he would any other self important person - go deliberately bland, and stay as uninteresting as possible. If you're not tasty bait, you can just be sediment in the water, barely worth paying attention to. If you attract attention, go limp; predators only want fresh lunches.

Staring at rows and rows of pegboard, covered in hanging hooks for fishing lures, Will almost gets away with being unseen again. The store is really small though, and Will's hair, which is starting to get past his shoulders, has a practically magnetic effect on the eyes of macho men who are looking for opportunities to be offended. Will would cut it, but he's gotten used to it, and really, fuck people who can't handle that he wants to look like an unkempt Spanish invader or outcast of the Summer of Love. Ferris, with his skull shorn hair, always seems torn between thinking Will is the very image of Tarzan of the Apes, and some hippie kid that drinks kombucha while discussing the circle of life. (*Hannibal, who you've come to realize is actually attracted to it, stares at it like he'd like to paint it.*)

If Will wasn't completely certain that Ferris has never so much as blinked contemplatively at his image of his own sexuality and masculinity, Will would think he's a closeted rural gay man living vicariously through man-handling fish in the backcountry rivers. As it is, Will knows that's not the case like many rural sons of America, and has to live with Ferris' oblivious need to prove something constantly, even with no one asking him to. He's sympathetic to it on some level, really.

Proving things is what draws him into the little storefront today, reading up on areas he hasn't thought to crawl back into. Salmon, despite being abundant in the area, follow all sorts of strange paths as the year darkens into the next, but he wants to show he can do this. This is an animal Will can hunt without doing harm to another person. Will finds himself in a rather unenviable state of wanting to do what Hannibal asked, because it's a very normal thing - there's nothing complicated, or dark, or illegal about catching fish in an area known for fishing. Will is capable at this, in a way that doesn't require empathy. It's a hard won skill he's learned from his father, and honed into an actual passion.

It's fortuitous in some ways. Will's only here today to catch Hannibal's fish, but he doesn't know where the fish are at this time of year. As much as he dislikes Ferris, Will understands that the man knows the area better than anyone else he knows, and would be able to point him in the right direction.

“Graham!” Ferris shouts from the shop counter, stacks of license forms in hand. He must be here for a regular work round. “Don’t see you out much this way. You’re getting ready for fishing season a little bit too late for anything serious. Realizing you missed out on all the fun?”

“I live up the hill from here,” Will finds himself quietly mumbling, but shakes his head. “I’d prefer to think of it as having other things to work on, and respecting that I don’t really know the good spots this late in the season. You’re the game warden - where’s the game at?” Will asks with a wry smile, trying to not let Ferris’ tone get the better of him.

“Hmm,” Ferris grunts, sucking at his own tongue in a purse-lipped consternation. Will has a hard time looking away from the chapped lips, the dirty blonde stubble building up around his face. For a man in his forties, Ferris has a rough look that speaks less to a hard life and more to a benign neglect, like he’s been left out in the sun too long. Happy in the woods, miserable in regular jobs, eking out some kind of a living in the mountainous hills of the coast. If he wasn’t such an asshole, Will thinks that they might have gotten along, but there’s only so many potshots he can take at his own masculinity and his skill before all he really wants to do is drag him behind his boat until the bubbles stop.

(*Now, now, that doesn’t sound very small town hospitality of you - if he heard, Hannibal might think he’s rubbing off on you.*)

“Tillamook, maybe,” he says after some length. “Better luck up near Portland, but if you want something that you don’t have to share with every moron from Seattle or the city, go up the Wilson river towards the West North Fork. No boats, just waders. Hope you’re not afraid of climbing into some nasty reeds by yourself,” he says with a sneer, scratching at his close-sheared head. “Probably North or South Fork Nehalem, but the weather’s kind of shit for crawling around there in the mud.”

Will nods, completely unfamiliar with the areas but unwilling to let it show - he’s a smart man, he can figure it out.

“Nothing past the bridge before the train tracks, and no live bait if you go back that way, Graham,” he adds, apparently exhausting his helpfulness and remembering he doesn’t like Will. “I’ll bag your ass like a damn trout if you do.”

Will smiles, placid and calm and filled with the pressuring wrath of magma, moving below the bedrock. There's a pain behind his eye, where a headache is building and makes him subconsciously reach for aspirin that he doesn't carry anymore. "Of course not," he says. "Wouldn't do to not follow the rules."

When Will gets home and pours his bag of artificial flies, hooks, and bobbers onto the countertop, Hannibal swings by, a wine glass in hand today instead of the usual stronger drinks. It's different, but not a surprise, Will thinks. He can't be expected to totally fall in lockstep with his lifestyle. Better to have the wine than the murdering and gallivanting across the countryside.

"Quite the proliferation of tools you have - though not the ones you usually favor. Not tying flies these days, Will?"

Will frowns. "Not allowed, apparently. House rules, or so the local rangers say."

(*You hate compromise of vision, and you hate people who compromise vision. Edmund Ferris can drink bleach for all you care. At one point, you would have said the same to Hannibal.*)

Hannibal smiles, and swirls his wine idly while walking back towards the windows, where outside the fog is overtaking downtown and the bay. "Good Will, always playing by the rules," he drawls, taking a sip. "It's a shame. Your hand tied ones were quite artful."

"They tend to get me into compromising situations," Will says lightly, pulling the cardboard seal off a bag of lures, all neon and striped. They look like fish in miniature, something cartoonish, inelegant. Will doesn't like them, but they work, and it's allowed for what he wants to do, and he's hardly going to spit on the advice of his local fishermen. "Turns out I'm not the only one I know that is capable of fly tying, so maybe not that artful or unique of a skill after all."

Bag after bag rips open and is turned over in dissatisfaction. He'd rather make something for this - it feels disingenuous to use something factory made. Will likes the idea of using home gathered materials. Maybe he'd make the sinker with Freddie's dog pin, and pry the small green crystal eye from it to set into the lure, where it will wink in the growing murk of the river.

Hannibal, always watching, surveys Will's agitation with ease.

(*Some things don't change.*)

Will's house may be the project house, but Hannibal's rental loft doesn't go unused. Despite Hannibal's willingness to play ball on the subject of dinner at what is now a pre-approved list on places that meet his standards, Hannibal is easily bored with menus, and cooks for himself quite often. Will has typically used this as an excuse to slink off for a truly heinously made french dip with starchy overly large steak fries down near the port, or cook up some of his own frozen catches of bass, but tonight it's rainy and unpleasant and Hannibal has the loft heated to an almost intolerable warmth between the stove, the oven, and the heater. (*You often wonder what he has against being cold - dressed to the nines or not, a man like that doesn't wear three to four layers in moderate temperatures out of a healthy respect for fashion.*)

The tops of the windows are fogging with heat, even as rain sloshes against the outside glass. The living room down the hall is a muted retreat from the clamor of the kitchen. He doesn't turn on the lights. It's cozy, even if the pillows are stupid, and everything is a little bit too hip for him. It's not really his style, but it's not really Hannibal's either, and shouldn't that make this a safe, liminal space?

Will stands in front of a fogged window, and takes in the evening - grey light is only just revealing the posts of the docks, the shipyards and pier houses sitting in the gloom. If he stands closer, his breath fogs the glass too. He wonders if it wouldn't be stupid to write something with a finger, something decidedly cryptic, or maybe just draw a big smiley face to see Hannibal's expression torn between something withering and amused.

In hand, his glass of calvados is nearing empty, and the oven beeps in readiness. Against better judgement, he's hungry at the sound of it.

Entering the kitchen is entering a den, where Hannibal is happily at work with sourdough bread. Bright red enameled kitchenware shuffles in and out of the oven, while at least one of two browned boules sits on a rack to cool. There's been a few times of incredulity that Will has heard the phrase "needing to feed his starter" come out of the other man's mouth, while looking at a watch worth potentially more than Will's house.

At first, he thinks this is a joke, or an excuse to leave early in the evening without it being awkward, and really, how terrible a euphemism is it to say "I need to feed the starter" instead of "I should leave". Will has to hand it to him that he's consistent the majority of the time about this phrase falling between 9 and 10 pm when he hasn't already excused himself. However, as time goes on, and Hannibal adopts more and more interest in west coast cuisine, he has become deadly serious about flour, feed times, and ensuring that the starter doesn't get too cold. It has a name - Hannibal won't tell him what it is, only that he probably couldn't pronounce it. Buttered sandwiches and cold cuts (*that tragically go to the seagulls because you think it's karmic justice*) begin to appear in the mornings, handed off with the coffee. The starter actually makes bread. Hannibal legitimately leaves early to make sure his bread-making bacterial colony lives another day.

Will feels better about this. Sometimes, when he's too deep in his drinks or too far out on the water, throwing chunks of it for the birds, Will feels less good about it when he starts doing the math of whether or not the sourdough starter is of equivalent value to his company. He can't really stop himself from the self depreciation, even when he knows it to be one. After all in Hannibal's world, people are food, and bread is food, and where does Will fall on this scale?

(*Don't be flippant - he holds you in higher esteem than that. How much more is the question.*)

"Has your yeast child finally done something with his life this week?" Will asks, stopping by the cooling rack where the bread sits. Little criss-crosses have been carefully razored into the surface. "Kind of macabre to make it sacrifice more than half its mass every day in case you're in the mood for toast, but I guess that's kind of your brand."

“She, thank you,” Hannibal replies with a low laugh, keeping his inside joke for another day. “I get more out of it than you get to see, or take and waste as the case may be. Although I can hardly say the starter itself doesn’t consume more than it makes.”

“How so?” asks Will, popping the cork off the top of the calvados bottle, set carefully adjacent to an ice bucket of attractively large cubed ice. He ought to dilute some of his drinks to not get too ahead of Hannibal if he can help it - his temper has never been great three or four glasses in. Another product of his heritage. “And for all you know I could be eating your absurd sandwiches with all the pride of a second-grader with the nicest sack lunch.”

“But you’re not,” Hannibal replies simply.

“I’m not,” agrees Will, and it’s a relief for it to be out there as a fact instead of an unspoken rule.

Hannibal smiles, checking the window of the oven, and turning one of the stove knobs to a lower temperature for the stock pot above. He doesn’t seem frustrated, only coolly amused. “It’s the first time you’ve admitted to it. Well done, Will. I had wondered if you intended to continue to pretend that it was only the dinner and a show that you were opposed to.”

“Lunch is an extremely loaded subject when you’re taking meals with a maneater,” Will says with a shrug and another taste of bitter apples, and the burn of the alcohol. It’s not his typical drink, but it’s somewhere to return to when the mode of inquiry gets uncomfortable. Hannibal has always had questing phrases that cut and don't merit honest response. Much like the burn of the alcohol, repeated exposure to cannibalism is the only thing that can make it fade - an acquired taste, or an academic understanding.

The timer on the oven ticks down as another loaf approaches readiness. Never one for kitchen conveniences, Hannibal wraps the palm of his hand with a white and blue striped kitchen towel, at the ready to remove the container.

“It’s no sacrifice, no matter where it ends up,” he says with a shrug. “I take satisfaction in making it and providing the option - your satisfaction is not required, only desired.”

“Wouldn’t you prefer that time to go towards something more personally enriching?” asks Will. “It can hardly be satisfying to know that you’re making things for me in the morning for me to ignore, or to pass off to other people, or just waste.”

“It’s never a waste of time to foster something you care for,” Hannibal replies, pulling a dutch oven from the stove, another uncooked boule of bread visible just over the edges. “Take our levain and starter here for example. Feeding a sourdough starter is a chore, yes, but it comes with some benefits that make the work worthwhile.”

“What’s the threshold for you?” Will asks. “Going through pounds and pounds of flour in a month on the off chance you bake is wasteful, but you don’t really keep to small inconveniences,” he sighs, scratching at his beard, feeling the thrum of blood in his fingertips with each pass. “Miriam Lass seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a jab at Jack. Following me to Minnesota for an opportunity to gather an ear and whatever else took your fancy is a few orders of magnitude removed from fostering identifiable benefits.”

(*“The effect I was hoping for was her death,” drawls Abel Gideon, dead eyed and tired and having a good time. “Elevated to my art.” He was a fake, but a straightforward one, and you can appreciate the clarity of purpose, even if he lacked clarity of self. Hannibal isn’t straightforward - neither are you.*)

Hannibal turns the loaf onto the rack, checking the scoring for flaws. He’s biding his time, or maybe stalling for it, but he eventually finds his words again. “The things I have done up to this point brought me here, in one way or another. I would call that a benefit, though certainly not quantifiable how I think you mean them to be.”

“You’ve done a lot that’s hard to reconcile.” Will stares at him - he’s heard this recently, but he doesn’t like it any better than the first time. “You want me to appreciate those things, and other moments of random circumstance,” he says, stalking around the counter to create distance again. “Hard to know what I’m appreciating or reaping benefits of when the design alternates between order and chaos.”

Hannibal smiles, a little twisted thing like he’s not quite sure whether to settle on a frown or a smile to begin with. Habit wins out. (*He doesn’t know what you want to see - that’s a novelty.*) “Intention and accident are both worth appreciating.”

Will sours at that. “Appreciating the effect, or just a good joke?”

“Have I made many jokes at someone’s expense recently?”

“Just the one where I throw up an ear because I thought I resembled someone I wasn’t,” Will breathes, and winces when he sees Hannibal go blank for a moment’s time. “Maybe the one time where you definitely ate my friend’s kidney to send a message, and then had the gall to play martyr when I retaliated the only way I could.”

They both frown in silence, Hannibal sighing in the relative quiet. Somewhere above, the heater kicks on, and rain hits a skylight. The oven hisses occasionally in its own heat, radiating warmth to their shins and feet. It’s more peaceful than it ought to be. They’re only talking of betrayals and cannibalism, no big deal, right?

“Do you think I’m laughing at you now?” asks Hannibal. “Of course you do. At your confusion, and your past mourning?”

“You were at one point - now I’m not sure if you want me to just watch the show, or that I need to laugh with you.” Will folds his arms in on himself, composed on the surface, but awkward beneath. ***Speak your truth!*** all the self-help books say. ***Use your words!*** all the parents tell their children, like it’s at all different from the adults.

“You seem to have a bone to pick, but also a point you’d like to make that you’re not sure how to arrive at,” Hannibal says with a sigh, turning to the stove with a neck roll and reaching for the wooden spoon that has been sitting to the side. “Picking bones is fine - it’s how we get the marrow from them. Tell me, Will - what is it that you would like me to actually say? That I want you to be a part of my human experience as an arbiter of order and chaos as a willing spectator, or that I want you to laugh at the punchline with me? That I perhaps love you, and everything surrounding that is collateral damage? You know the answer to that.”

(*You wince at the word love. Love as you know it is late-night texts, and unexpected kinship as you age. Shared interests. Thinking about someone when they’re gone. Understanding why your father and people like him make the decisions that they do. You don’t know Hannibal’s equivalent, only that he occasionally matches yours.*)

“Not a very flattering portrait of yourself,” Will says, chewing at the flesh of his cheek.

Hannibal stares into the stock pot in front of him, churning it in idle figure-eights. The soup is thick, but the attention is drawn out for something that simple to Hannibal. It’s laughable to consider his full attention paid to it. Hannibal is hardly challenged by the preparation of soup. An analog clock on the wall ticks along with the rain in the uncomfortable silence.

Maybe Hannibal won’t respond at all - maybe they’ll take up arms with the utensils and tear at each other. Maybe they’ll do their usual graceless exit from conflict with hands at each other’s throats and teeth at each other’s lips and necks and hands. (*He thinks he loves you - what does that look like in a person like him?*) Will is at a loss what point he was trying to make at all in the face of Hannibal’s surprising desire to get to the heart of the matter. After a moment gone too long, Hannibal puts the lid on the pot, turns the gas down to simmer, and turns himself to lean on the countertop adjacent.

“You are quite determined to paint me the villain whenever your morals decide to chafe. Morning, afternoon, and night, rather at random. Mercurial. I've asked again in passing, but perhaps I should be more direct - Why don’t you tell me to go?” he asks, and Will spies the veins of his arms rising in his tight grip of the counter lip. Angry, Will thinks somewhat absently. Hannibal is angry. Good. He should be angry. It feels good for a barb to catch skin.

“You could send me off like any other lunch, presumably overboard somewhere,” he continues, teeth bright against his scornful mouth. “What difference would it make? Why don’t you send me away to do whatever it is that you prefer to fill your days with, and spare us the song and dance?”

But why *doesn’t* he tell him to go?

Will opens his mouth, and shuts it. Repeats steps one and two. He feels like an ass floundering for an answer.

(*Honesty, from here on. You said it yourself. You swore it under a sign.*)

“Because I missed you,” he blurts out, when Hannibal’s stare becomes too long and pointed. It doesn’t stop the stare, but it does soften it. “Because you’re a disease, and I had almost healed, but I missed you.”

Hannibal mulls that, examining his works on the cooling rack. He is an impassable path. “I cannot make you trust my intentions, nor will I make any promises I wouldn’t keep,” he says after a moment’s calm, as sure as stone. “You understand me in starts and stops, of which the stops are the habit of someone who has been burned. I accept that as my penance - that you can and do understand me, but may not always desire to.”

Understatement of the year, Will thinks bitterly. “Sometimes it’s better to not have the answer - can’t be disappointed that way, even if I know better,” he says, and leans against the counter. It’s cold, chilling him through the fabric of his flannel shirt. He thinks the skin of his arms might be dry, unlike his eyes.

“Are you so keen to be disappointed?” Hannibal asks, with a huff. “What is it that you actually distrust, right now, at this moment?” When Will feels his own mouth move to show his teeth in a snarl, Hannibal waves one hand to clear an invisible irritance, though he is still soft at the mouth and around the eyes. “I accept there’s issues upon issues we could spend years working through, but I want to know what is it that makes you hesitate? What swims in your vision in the face of a croissant, or simple sandwich, even knowing that it can’t be what you suspect?”

(*“I know who I am. I’m not so sure I know who you are anymore.”*)

“Other than the ear, did you ever feed anyone more of Abigail?” and oh, Will wishes he sounded firmer, more intimidating than the shrinking shadow he feels he’s turned into. He wants to know, but he doesn’t. He wants the closure, but he doesn’t want the image. She can just be missing in the Minnesota Woods if he doesn’t ask. Pay no mind to the charnel house that is the kitchen, or the man behind the curtain.

Hannibal sighs, and takes a sip of his own drink at his side. He swallows too much, doesn’t wince, just considers the glass before looking up again. Will feels the burn of it, even if Hannibal’s face shows none.

“No,” Hannibal replies, eyes locked to Will’s. “She’s a girl not to be shared,” he adds, low and careful. “Not with Alana, or Jack Crawford, or random acquaintances who bear no more consideration for their meal than what the next plate is. That is her fate, no matter the father she stands with. Surely you can appreciate the design of *that* .”

Will hisses in a breath, lets it blow out his nose like it’s to empty his lungs. He does understand. He can’t think of a more fitting a conclusion, if a conclusion it must be. He thinks there must be something wrong with him, to stand here next to Hannibal, and talk of the butchery of teenagers, and think the sin would be feeding Abigail Hobbs to an unappreciative audience, as he feeds sandwiches to birds that don’t know better than they must eat.

When the second loaf is finally ready, Hannibal returns from his bedroom dressed comfortable but clean of flour and the foul-shadow of his anger and disappointment. He still keeps a collared shirt, but it’s softened by a big black sweater and olive green jogger pants. Will is a little mystified by them - the comfortable cotton, the thigh pockets, even the brand name tag stitched delicately onto the sides. In some ways Hannibal looks more naked than he does when actually naked.

He cuts bread from the cooled fresh loaf, he heats a skillet with pats of salted butter, and works his way through a variety of cheese slices. On one sandwich, carefully arrayed, smoked gouda and cheddar sit in attractively thin and triangular slices, fanned to melt into each other. On the other, to Will’s shock, Hannibal struggles to peel plastic casings off loud orange squares of American cheese, original recipe, no adaptations for a health conscious or organic market. They small equally wonderful cooking - look tasty as they can be on dove grey plates with matching bowls of bright and acidic tomato soup where the oil and pepper floats on top.

The fancy sandwich Hannibal pulls towards himself, cutting it into exacting equilateral triangles. The second plate, the store-bought orange spread sandwich, gets a simple slice diagonally down the middle.

Hannibal pushes the second plate towards Will, and Will, always the skeptic, watches it like a snake crossing the floor. “You’ve expressed a preference for standard brands - I’ve done my best to circumnavigate anything that might be seen as ‘hoighty-toity’, per the grocery store

clerk. Not my preference, but cold nights are for comfort food, and comfort food should be familiar, yes?"

Two slices of sourdough, sauteed brown and shiny with butter, with the distinctive borderline neon pastel orange of processed cheese product. It's the humblest thing that has probably ever sat in Hannibal's kitchen, defiantly unnatural in tone and its tendency to ooze from the sides of no doubt heavily laboured over bread. If it regressed further into being Wonder bread, it wouldn't be something not at home with Beau or with Will in high school and college.

"You do not have to eat it," Hannibal continues, grabbing for his own plate. "It simply felt inappropriate to eat without offering something to you as well. Wear it as a costume for the evening if you wish, and we can pretend to have dinner at home."

There's a small bar counter in front of one of the fogged loft windows, two stools that haven't been used by much of anyone crowded up against them. Hannibal heads towards them from the kitchen to the living room, pulling it away to frown at the tacky cowhide of the cushion to sit and stare outside, where the pier lights are starting to twinkle in the rainfall.

Will, strangely heavy as he carries his American grilled cheese that straddles craft with shit processing, pulls up next to him. It's an uncomfortable stool. It's an uncomfortable moment to experience, watching Hannibal consider his own finer Monte Cristo sandwich and the accompanying bright tomato soup in the unlit dark of the living room. He turns his own head to the sandwich and soup of his own again, feeling his stomach stir in pleasant memory of the smell.

(*You know he hasn't killed someone here - deep in your gut, you just know. Should you still be ashamed at your hunger? Is it the cooking that stops you, or the ingredients? You're always partaking in something, so why is this different?*)

Grilled cheese is safe. Grilled cheese is something made with processed slices of American dyed milk fats named cheese because what else do you call it, more butter and bread than food. Dipping it into a tomato and garlic soup, where halves of cherry tomatoes float in tangy juice and oil, Will can accept this. It's something he'd choose for himself, even if he does think the fancy bread is overkill, and the fresh cooked tomatoes in the soup isn't like what he remembers coming out of the can. It's as good a facsimile as Hannibal's hand can make.

Will picks up half of the sandwich, dips it into the soup, and takes a noisy, obnoxious bite. It tastes better than what he's familiar with, but it's still recognizable. Safe.

Hannibal watches him eat, crooked mouthed and soft in a way he typically isn't, before turning to his own food with long-fingered care, never messy or inelegant even when eating with his hands. It feels like the ease of it should be a lie, but it's just cheese - Will watched him unwrap singles of Kraft with a grimace himself. It's what he prefers, even though there's perfectly good gouda, swiss, gruyere, and cheddar in the refrigerator, carefully sealed in air-tight glass jars, waiting to impress.

Nobody remarks on dinner, though Will doesn't manage more than half the sandwich before his stomach turns with nerves. It's cleared away before it can be commented on sheepishly or snidely. When Will leaves to mind the dogs and head to bed, Hannibal takes his hand in his own, and presses his lips to Will's pulse. Calling it a kiss is reductionist - it's more that he feels his pulse, and is grateful for it.

An early Saturday morning, approaching late November, finds Will loading the back of his Volvo with his waders, tackle box, and small bags full of carefully defrosted bait. He can't see more than 10 feet in any direction from his car in the sea fog, but that promises to be the kind of quiet day he's hoping to have. He doesn't really plan on telling anyone where he's at - he simply leaves a small note attached to the sleek black refrigerator with the most obnoxious crab magnet he could find at the gas station. He has to keep the kitchen at least a little humble. ***Gone fishing, be back around mid-afternoon.***

Hannibal has promised to check on the dogs, so nobody to nose at him this time, canine or carnivore alike, and nowhere he's expected to be for more than half a day.

He's more excited than the situation really warrants. It's not that Will doesn't get alone time. Hannibal may be persistent, and a little lonely during the day while Will is at work, but both understand the need to be in solitude from time to time. They've had a lifetime to acclimate to keeping their own company without complaint. Will doesn't particularly want to sit in silence and listen to Rachmaninov, and Hannibal has almost no interest, academic or otherwise, in watching Will go over nautical charts of the Columbia basin and rivers. (*"You*

are the expert in these matters - I don't pretend to have the skill to navigate a larger boat, and it's not as if you ever let me on yours *to necessitate the need to know." You had laughed at the actual complaint - he wants to go on the boat, but it's a retreat for you, and he doesn't really need to. A small cheap lesson to impart to a spoiled man.*)

Driving down the coast is mellow, with no traffic to speak of, though he does stop to get cheap hashbrowns and coffee before heading through Tillamook and into the coastal range just to the east of it. Neahkhanie Mountain rises in the rearview mirror, a last bastion of basaltic strength before it disappears in the twisting roads that wrap around the rivers of the inland.

While there's no traffic to speak of at this point in time, Will's not of a mind to share his span of water today. The Wilson River is quieter, when Will finally makes his decision on what particular thicket of backwoods vegetation that he's willing to brave. Technically the Nehalem River would have Hatchery fish in it that would make Will's experience as an angler a bit more relaxed and easy to execute, but the idea of randomly encountering Edmund Ferris and having his gear and tags checked over makes Will viscerally repulsed. He'll take his chances in the more remote area with less fish. Better thinking time. Better way to break off the rust of not having fly fished on shore in several months. (*You know you can't really count the imagined streams and catches - you also can't imagine those things without the taint of bad memories.*)

The further from the main road he gets and into the fire roads, the more anxious he feels. He's not at all familiar with the area. He's not so much as left the shoreline for the majority of his time in Astoria, constantly between boats and riverside towns. The tall hills are green and lush, but oppressively quiet in the absence of company. The trees are sentries, a fence of branches that will cover him as snugly as a blanket. Between them and the rocky outcroppings that hide between thickets, modern technology outside of the car is unnecessary.

It's not really the ticks, bears, rocks, threats of exposure, or any number of other common ailments in the woods that scares him. He's comfortable with those - he knows what that looks like. It's just how vast and empty and full of unknown glens and fens that he doesn't recognize that are here. When was the last time he really was beyond anyone's reach, that wasn't entirely just in his head?

It's about half an hour to get to the end of the paved road following the Wilson River, and another half and hour of slow-going navigation over the washed out dirt road, avoiding rocks and pits of mud. Will shimmies into his waders , straps his cross-body tackle box to himself,

and follows the water's edge. Marionberry and raspberry vines snag at his shirtsleeves and hands, and he keeps the discomfort to himself. It's a good thing he didn't bring the dogs - he'd be picking burrs and thorns out of their coats and paws forever.

Another 30 minutes back, until the shadow of a hill is on either side of him, and the river meets a couple streams and flattens in front of him. A good place to meet as many fish as he can. He favors a fork from the main body of the river to another tributary where he won't have to consider if he'll encounter someone. There's no one where he's parked, only a few empty pickup trucks close to a small lake about five miles back, their owners already hidden in the mist and forest at their own spans of river. Just Will, and hopefully a few unlucky fish.

It's strange, being truly alone and away and unable to receive contact. Even in Wolf Trap before getting the dogs back, he always knew he had a neighbor adjacent to him if he needed to break his bubble of introversion. No Alana doing house calls, or Jack coming up with a broad palm to the shoulder, more fraternal than has ever really been owed - *"You holding it together, Graham?"* No AV equipment filming him in a cell. No Winston and Buster butting heads against the palms of his hands, no Hannibal leaving emails, phone calls, text messages, anything and everything he can do to make sure Will knows he's somewhere. Will wouldn't label it as needy - more manipulative than anything.

A group of deer cross in the shallows ahead, shy does in staggering groups of two or three. Pretty long-legged blacktails, nothing like the elk brute that occasionally peaks out from the eaves of his house and shadows of his hall, less so these days. They look at him for a few minutes, but when he doesn't move, they continue on their way, picking between loose pebbles and sediment that streams down and away in trails of ruddy curling brown water.

Nothing but water surrounds Will in front and behind, the rocky texture of the river floor crunching under his boots. He watches the deer cross the wide shallows, watches green and red flash of his bobber in the ripples, and in the ripples the silver-green light of an overcast day, and in this he disappears.

The bobber sinks at some point. Will only realizes it happens at all when the pole in his hand gives a firm jerk, and with the hindbrain that makes him gore Freddie's head in the kitchen, he clamps his fingers down until they whiten, and moves to catch the spinning reel.

From the river jumps the strange red and silver body of a coho salmon.

Will tries to not get too excited. It's exactly what Hannibal would probably want. Hell, it's the kind of fish that he'd be happy to drive himself to the Fish & Game office just to rub it in Ferris' face. "First time in the area," he'd add, widening his arms. "At least as long as my leg from shin to foot and certainly as thick as my thigh I think. How's that for dick swingin' to make a point?" His daddy would cheers this, and ask for a picture, and that's a kind of pride that he doesn't feel too often.

Unfortunately, it's a larger fish than he's really familiar with or had been planning for, big and healthy and clearly intent on continuing upwards with or without Will's hook in his mouth. He's lucky it got hooked at all, probably only thanks to Will's zoning out and leaving the river to run its course without disturbing the water. Will, with his death grip on the rod, can barely muster a plan to tire the thing before he feels the tell-tale snapping of the wire.

The fish gets away, and Will, feeling a little down on his luck, just shakes his head and checks his phone, carefully nestled in a high shirt pocket and sealed in a ziploc bag. In the absence of action or meditation, he feels chilled with mist, and rubs his hands together. He's only been out here for a little while - it's a little dark for late morning, but maybe there's still time to try again before whatever storm is coming in lands in the hills.

There's still no cell signal, so no notable messages from Hannibal or Beau to be had, but Will sees something that disturbs him a fair bit more.

4:37pm , it reads.

It's close to 8 pm by the time he pulls up in front of the house, where the Land Rover sits like a shiny bad omen in the street light. The living room windows are warm with the yellow light of the fireplace sconces, and the silhouette of Winston's head can be seen with ease, while Buster's rises and falls as he jumps to see over the high sill that overlooks his driveway. For a moment, Hannibal can be seen as well, just a flash of his green sweater and overcoat still on.

From his waking point in the river, it takes Will nearly an hour to stumble his way back to the Volvo and repack his gear, and another two to drive the fire roads to the adjoining streets that will take him back to the coast and up towards the Columbia River. The daylight is nearly nothing, and a creeping sense of panic makes each decision between wading back to the bank and getting in the driver's seat feel crooked, a picture on the wall hung incorrectly. The trees are a blanket of darkness even with the headlights of the car navigating back to the main highway, and between each of their branches a voidless hollow. They stand closer together, shoulder to shoulder, full of vernal, evergreen promise.

"Are you often in the habit of disappearing for hours after your estimated arrival time in the back woods of Oregon?" Hannibal sighs when Will ascends the stairs into the kitchen. Will would call it a sigh of relief, but there's irritation there, maybe stress. The man's eyes are squinted to create deep furrows at his nose and cheeks alike. "I presume you were unable to receive text messages and calls," he adds, a little officious.

Will winces a bit. "Rocky hillsides aren't really known for their exceptional wave transmission. Good place to go missing, to varying degrees of permanence."

"Well you certainly achieved that in part," says Hannibal, working his jaw a little bit before his frown loses some tension, eyes wandering over Will who looks largely whole and hale, if a little bit wet. "Was there any reason to stay, or were you just not ready to come back?"

"Nearly caught your fish. Didn't catch your fish," Will says with a shrug. "Got close towards the end, but I must have lost track of time waiting for him."

"It's a bad habit of yours, losing time," Hannibal mutters, turning to the stove, where a kettle of water is going. He pours water into the thrifted mugs, tea bag tags hanging over the edges with wedges of lemon and a dram of scotch each. It's the most freeform Hannibal has likely been with a cocktail - he must be more disturbed than he lets on.

"I am sure you'll find success - already you've seen your quarry once, and you know better for next time," he says, removing tea bags. "Or as they say in my native home, the constant drip of water wears at the stone."

Will takes the drink with a mouthed thank you, but Hannibal catches his wrist again, almost fast enough to startle Will with his viper-like haste. He holds it in place, index and middle finger pressed firmly against the flat of it, for what Will suspects is a count of ten. When he lets go, he apologizes quietly and thanks Will for his patience, and guides the mug closer to Will with a strange look before taking up his own.

In a rare act of apology from Will and concession from Hannibal, Will allows Hannibal to stay the night upstairs with him when Hannibal seems hesitant to leave, somehow unsettled. (*You're unsettled too - it's a long time to lose yourself in the woods. It's a strange feeling to see Hannibal's watchfulness go from curiosity to something focused and avian again.*) The apology is that Hannibal can come to the upper floor with him at all, and share his rickety piles that he's deemed to be bedroom furniture - piles of books for the side tables, piles of blankets on the air mattress, piles of clothes because Will has not once really thought he needed a chest of drawers with his few important clothes hanging in a small closet. The concession from Hannibal is that he's not allowed to comment on any of it. He can go the fuck home if he wants to stick his pinkies out and be a snob. Will's too chilled and tired tonight to deal with him.

Hannibal takes it pretty well in stride, familiar with what he's getting into. He does take an hour to go back to his place and gather some items from home, which fit very tidily in a small Patagonia duffel, and presumably to ensure his bread science project is adequately fed.

They don't really do anything intimate, other than the intimacy of sleeping in close quarters, which starts with them each on their side of the (*incredibly squeaky under the weight of two adult men*) air mattress, but ends with them rolling into each other in the middle, cushioned on either side by a dog. Will supposes it's intimate to hide his face in the nook of Hannibal's shoulder, trying not to fixate on the sensation of chest hair against his own shoulder.

"Good night, Will," Hannibal says, like he's said every night, not a single change in tone or volume. Consistent.

"'Night," says Will, and squeezes his hands into fists bundled between his body and Hannibal's.

(*Sometimes you obsess on the bizarreness of sharing space with him - how he's a man, how he's a murderer several times over, how he's blithely watched you seize after meals, how despite that he touches you like you're something desirable, how unshy he is to leave marks and showcase ones he gets in return, how letting him inside you and stoke hot rushes of want and make you feel small with comfort instead of shame is easier than letting him express casual affection in that you have the comfort of long breaks in between to think* what does that mean, what does that mean .)

The startling human absence of the woods fades eventually, listening to Hannibal's pulse, and regulating his own with long, methodical breaths in time with each other.

In the morning, Hannibal is cleaning a highball glass over the whiteness of the sink, having worked through the mugs of tea already. The veins in his hand catch the light from the muted sunlight from the living room, even as his eyes are shadowed. Even in Will's Jekyll and Hyde of a house, he is more striking and comfortable in his surroundings than Will.

"I believe you might be sick," he says.

(*Such things he says to you. Sick minded? Sick bodied? By nature or by design?*)

"Well spotted. What else is new?" asks Will, and tries to not frantically think this is an unwelcome development.

Hannibal smiles, but it's unusually strained, like he's tasted something bad. "I see you are in a mood this morning. Did your Dr. Schroeder with the sharp mouth ever give you the literature on anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis? It's hardly something most people know about off-hand."

"She must have been too busy dealing with your bullshit to give me the TED talk," Will retorts, putting a loose couple of bolts and nuts in what he has decreed to be a junk drawer. Its awkward placement makes it good for nothing but takeout menus, miscellaneous bits that Will has forgotten what they go to, and a series of random cloth rags that get used for

cleaning dog feet. “I read the printouts, and I’ve done the prolonged immune treatments. You’ll be happy to know that a common cold landed me in the hospital in May before I finished. So I guess add that to your no doubt vast repertoire of correct predictive diagnosis.”

Hannibal frowns severely. “I am hardly overjoyed by the prospect of your illness, for all that I did say it was a possibility you would struggle with something like that.”

Will laughs. “Except when it’s convenient to use it as entertainment.” Will feels his own smile, divorced from humor, even if he does say it like it’s a simple verbal volley, not a history of violence against his autonomy. For every insight Will gains into Hannibal’s seemingly infinite well of patience, there’s the occasional truth that his patience is a rotting kind, and that it’s been turned against Will before.

That patience starts working again, where Will feels the chill of a cold shoulder as Hannibal meticulously sets down the glass, aligning it to another on the bright quartz of the counter. He is frustrated, drawn in every line of his neck and shoulders.

“You smell of illness,” he says, drying his hands on a hand towel. (*Another thing that has snuck in here without permission. It’s soft and deep grey, and gently striped and you want to strangle him with it, him and his elegant hands.*) “Perhaps a bit of an overstatement, since they all have a particular odor, though I do associate this particular one with a sort of dough-like sweetness. Nothing you’d notice, something only evident after hard work or a nightmare, as you had last night. It’s familiar to me.”

Will doesn’t remember the nightmare. Only waking and being cold, and warm again as he settles against Hannibal’s weight, long fingers running down his spine. Nothing necessitating towels, or new t-shirts, or an invested interest in aspirin manufacturing, walking off rooftops, or theatrical escapes across the Minnesota countryside, his life becoming a tv show that he misses every other episode of.

He doesn’t trust the statement at all.

“Is this a joke?” he asks, only the slightest vibrato of a laugh jumping out with it. “The bizarro version of ‘make Will think he’s crazy’, playing it from the other side?”

“You wouldn’t know what it feels like in the absence of the psychotic symptoms, or in the absence of external stressors,” Hannibal pushes on. “I know what it looks like, because I watched it develop last time.”

“And thanks for that,” Will sneers. “I don’t need or want your assistance on that particular project. Keep it to the kitchen and out of my medicine cabinet - that’s where you like to be anyway.”

Hannibal cracks his neck, fingers tapping against the counter. He says nothing, chewing at his own tongue like he’d prefer to bite it off than keep it in check. Serves him right. Serves Will right.

“I know what it feels like to be sick,” Will continues. “I’m just tired.”

act 4 - each according to its kind, and it was so

The problem with not experiencing problems for long stretches of time is that Will starts to forget what it was like when he had actual, big problems.

Not self-degradation - that's a problem Will's had since he was in elementary school, and wasn't able to explain very well that not only were his parents not divorced when it came out that Will only had his daddy, but that the rumor was his mom had blown her own head off. (*When he hears about this, Daddy takes you out of that school faster than he goes through a pack of cigarettes, swearing up a storm from the front office to the classroom where he lifts you straight out of your desk, and back out to the car. You live in a different state by the end of the month. You know now the embarrassment was his own, not yours, but it sticks to you anyway.*) He makes the other officers in the force uncomfortable with too blunt comments, and too vague of an idea of the person they work with. It persists clear up to Alana rejecting him for being too weird, Hannibal giving him to the prison system wrapped up in Will's own fly tying string, and everyone agreeing as a whole that he's either evil or inherently mentally ill. Drinks all around, they've solved the mystery.

Not loneliness - Will's had some good times with fairweather friends, colleagues, and academics with similar interests in forensics, fishing, flesh-eating bugs, and hating the federal government, all the F-grade content, but doesn't have many people that can really go toe to toe with his drifting thought process. He forgets to explain jumps in conversation. He leaves points on the table to return to in a month, when no one really wants to revisit an argument they've already forgotten. He tries not to get close to people, and avoids attaching enough emotion to their comments and complaints to see anything other than the facsimile he can break down into small parts. He's considered himself single for almost all his adult life. Hannibal is an exception in this. No matter how rotten he is, Will has to face he feels good with him. But loneliness is a familiar but largely untroubling detail of his life. They'll use it to explain why he's maladjusted someday he's sure. It's not a problem, but an innate part of his character. Does not play well with others, keep in single person household.

Those are both terrible states of being, but not worth commenting on or avoiding. They're worn in like a good pair of shoes.

What's actually been historically terrible for him are things that are much more obviously troubling, and something he tries not to repeat, ever. Will can deal with being a weirdo or spending too much time by himself, but he's not in a hurry to re-experience the actual problems of his now halfway spent life.

He’s been stabbed once. He’s been shot once. He’s been in prison once. He’s been mortally ill once. He’s murdered someone outright once. He’s been on trial with the potential of the death penalty once, ironically not tied to the previous experience, no matter how deserved.

(*You’ve trusted Hannibal once.*)

Having encephalitis, and thinking he’s absolutely out of his gourd is firmly on the list of things to only experience once. Screw the literature, screw the 13 to 35 percent recurrence range, and really, why is the recurrence range so wide? Why does he have to be one of the numbers that increases the incidence of recurrence? Why can’t he have entirely typical encephalitis, like the old fashioned brain stem eating variety you get in the tropics because mosquito repellent is for planners, instead of the one where the immune system wakes up one day and doesn’t recognize why you have a brain at all.

“Maybe I’m just allergic to you,” Will says over a beer. Hannibal looks like he’s losing the will to live. “Maybe I’ve always just had extreme adverse reactions to being subjected to bullshit for months at a time. Profoundly allergic to bullshit.”

Hannibal turns a glass of wine on the arm of his porch chair, refusing to take the bait. He’s been working at Will for the last two days to let him write a prescription for prednisone. Will in turn tells Hannibal that if he wanted to abuse steroids, he’d use it to gain some muscle mass or to become an avid biker, not to avoid going postal over phantom deer.

“You can skip all that fun if you’d take something that keeps your brain from swelling,” Hannibal says with a twisted smile, trying to still the tension in his hands, but ultimately failing in that the glass continues to turn, and Will can see it. “We can visit Portland again and see someone else if you’d prefer, if your Doctor Schroeder won’t keep you on as a client without another in-person appointment.”

Will actually laughs. “Absolutely not,” he says around a barking cough, beer catching in his throat. “I thought I had split your last referral’s face in two like a peach. I’ll go to urgent care like the obstinate middle aged man that I am, get told it’s the flu, and then accidentally die of something respectable like a heart attack, or a chainsaw accident.”

“Are you so determined to die, in completely preventable circumstances, as an opportunity to prove me wrong?” asks Hannibal. (*Yes, you think.*) “And are there many chainsaws sitting idle in the path of your day to day activities?”

“Just one big one that has an appreciation for neoclassical furniture and waylaying random rude people to and from their jobs in exceedingly over the top and anatomically driven displays, apparently.”

Hannibal’s smile grows teeth. “I consider myself a higher precision tool than that,” he replies, examining sediment in his pinot noir - no doubt another disappointment in Hannibal’s evening. “Perhaps a bone awl, or a curved hemostat.”

If he’s actually amused or if he’s offended, Will really doesn’t care. He’ll wait for something else to clue him into whether or not he’s sick or he’s crazy. As long as he’s not seeing things, there’s a dozen potential standard, *plebeian* illnesses that Will can have that don’t evoke the memory of begging to be helped, and ultimately nearly burning up alive, match-hot and fuel-driven. He can barely look at Hannibal at the thought of it.

They finally finish the bathroom renovation. It’s only fair to say “they” because Hannibal did a surprising amount of the work, including renting a wet stone cutting saw and becoming a mason for a day. It’s all glossy black and white-veined marble, dark brass fixtures, green tiles, and a pedestal sink that has replaced the medicine cabinet as to keep Will from further maiming himself. Taking up the bulk of the room, the raised dark bathtub promises more than it can deliver - the water heater is still no good, but that’s not in the literal room, and Will can get to it later.

The hallway heading to it, which started as a distraction while waiting on delivery and became something of a personal fascination for Hannibal, is a vivid oxblood red scattered with wainscotting, raised paneling, and a series of curated black and white sketches in painfully mathematically precise segments. Will suspects Hannibal has anonymously put one of his own drawings in the selection, but hasn’t pressed him on the subject.

(*It’s a very fine image of a boat on the water, seabirds and what is no doubt you, throwing a sandwich away to get their attention. At least he has a sense of humor about it.*)

Will's sure someone would be sold on the house if they only took photos of the areas that Hannibal had been responsible for. The areas that still belong to Will are the perpetual calamity of the good bones of the house mingled with his kleptocratic thrifting habits.

"We should buy you a series of quilt racks," Hannibal tells him one day, watching Will look for a book in the wreckage of piles that he has in the bedroom. Will winces when the loose floorboard rattles under his foot a little - pay no attention, nothing to see here he thinks fervently into the universe. Hannibal just keeps standing at the edges of the room, folding some of the more interesting patterned blankets in tidy squares. "You can play it off as some kind of personal hobby, collecting quilts, and no one has to be any the wiser that you're sleeping on all of them like a cairn of grandmotherly crafts."

"That acts on the assumption I'd be willing to put them away every day," Will replies, "which I'm not. The dogs come up here when I'm gone, and even you keep something covering the blue velvet couch in the living room in hopes they'll stay off it."

Hannibal merely sighs, and tries to not disrupt enough to draw Will's attention to him. Will's attention is drawn no matter what, but he tolerates it. With every pile of necessities, and small flaws, the house is still partially his. But the bathroom is another thing finished, and Will doesn't have a pile of varied entertainments on hand.

Maybe he can just buy another house. Maybe that delays the discussion they need to have until next month, next year, next lifetime.

Will plans on going fishing again the following weekend. It's getting late in the year, there's still a few overcast but not totally miserable days on the radar, and he's already bought his tags. Waste not, want not. He jokes that a salmon is probably going to be Hannibal's Christmas gift.

Hannibal, despite Will's protestations many times over, insists on coming this time. He makes his case the Friday night before, leaning over the kitchen counter in Will's house, while Will leans over his own tools across from him, and insists Hannibal will be bored.

(*See, you have utensils in your kitchen - just not the type he wants you to use, or why.*)

“If it were a group activity, and I thought you actually liked fishing, I wouldn’t be opposed,” Will explains between sorting his tackle box, still not quite satisfied of how the store-bought lures sit next to his own feathered and furred ones, the work of several tedious hours wandering and weaving as Ariadne at a loom. There’s time and craft in his - there’s glittery plastic in the others. “But you’re going to sit there and sigh, or worse still, talk, and I’m not actually going to get the experience I’m looking for, or a fish probably.”

“Are you so poor a fisherman that you cannot perform to an audience?” Hannibal asks teasingly, eyes tracing the careful color-categorized organization of the tackle box tray.

“I feel like there’s a point where I’m supposed to object that it’s the process and the ritual more than the final result that matters, but then I think I might be wading into validating why you spend 48 hour cycles obsessing over cold dough fermentation.”

“You’re welcome to watch me knead dough, as I hope I would be welcome to watch you cast your line,” Hannibal objects, finger tapping at the quartz of the counter. “You’re welcome to watch me do whatever you want, participation not required.”

(*You know. By the way he occasionally looks to see if* you’re *looking, you know. He doesn’t need you to look, but half the satisfaction is the show, and for reasons you still don’t always understand, you’re his favorite audience.*)

Will sighs. “Be here at 5:30,” he says, turning a lead sinker between his fingers. It rolls, ponderously heavy, a little drop of mercury between the lines of his hand. “It’s going to be a slow day, you know.”

“Nothing that brings you joy is boring,” Hannibal says from across the span of white between them. “It’s only a matter of finding the right attitude to learn from it and enjoy.”

(*But mostly you know he's not talking about breadmaking, or composition, or lectures in Portland, and you're afraid of that.*)

The alarm goes off at 4:00 am, shining in the dark of his bedroom from the shiny hardwood floor. He groans, and drinks the glass of water that he's neglected next to his book, a small travel copy of *The Waste Land* that glitters in gold leaf letters by the glow of his phone screen.

The dogs scramble to follow him downstairs when he doesn't settle back in with them, and dance with joy when clipped into their harnesses that sit next to their collars like a fine suitcase handle - he likes to think he can pick them up like unwieldy luggage when needed when they wear these, pulling them up over and around awkward spots in the hikes out to the fishing grounds. If Hannibal is going, so too must they, and while it's a lot of work and he's not looking forward to cleaning their muddy feet several times over, he takes brief pleasure in their excitement.

Hannibal is prompt and dressed to the nines equivalent for a hike, rain shell, wading pants and black boots all shiny and ready for a day in the drizzly rain. The little black duffel bag makes another appearance in the rear of the Land Rover, presumably full of entertainments or food or maybe a torture go-kit, whatever it is that Hannibal likes to keep on hand just in case. They almost argue before the sun even brightens the grey sky when Hannibal doesn't ask so much as informs Will that he'd like to drive.

"I insist," remarks Hannibal, breath billowing in the frigid morning air. "Consider it my part of the work, and an excuse for me to test the vehicle's off-road abilities that were heavily touted. Tell whoever you'd like where we're going if it concerns you," he adds, opening the trunk for Will's fishing supplies and the dogs to jump in. The seats have been pushed down, and a fleece blanket thrown over the rest. Tidy. Prepared for muddy paws. There's of course coffee.

Will shrugs it off with ease he doesn't really expect to feel, pushing his gear in the back and watching Winston and Buster scale the car with the click of their nails. The dogs are happy and provided for. There are seat warmers, and Will could use a nap to ward off the chill that he didn't quite shake after waking.

Today doesn't take them back to Will's last spot - between fighting off the raspberry bushes, having to tread through the water to get to a stretch of broad isolation on the river, and it just not being a good place for company, human or otherwise, Will accepts that he'll try out Ferris' other recommendation. (*It can't hurt to be seen by another human being when in the company of a notorious serial killer in the forest, you think. Good policy all around. Self care. You are an absolute pinnacle of good decision making, if you could just get your brain to stop displaying signs of deterioration. But you know, good decision making.*) The drive is just south of Seaside, weaving into the coastal hills again, dipping into pockets of timber harvesting, secluded waterside homes, and stretches of the curving main concourse of the Nehalem River. While it's hardly a secluded place like Will prefers, it's also not too hard to find a place to pull off the road and cross an open space or trek through some trees to find a low bank with plenty of room to spread out and take in the morning.

They find one at the edge of a campground, empty save for a small sedan at the far end that shelters a little tent and family that has bravely endured a night of slow-falling rain. They give them a wide berth, heading southwards by foot with dogs in tow through dense foliage and ferns until the river sits wide, flat and dark before them. If they go much further, another river will flow into it, disturbing the current. It'll need to be here. Will steps in automatically, but steps out when he considers he doesn't know where to keep the dogs, or Hannibal for that matter. Obligations start sneaking into his sense of calm.

"I'll entertain myself," Hannibal says after a moment, seeing Will at the water's edge. "Choose your bit of the water, and we will find a comfortable spot as appropriate."

Will nods, and wades out until he feels the water up to his calves, and small depressions between larger stones secure his feet in place. He can't see the fish in the low morning light, but he can feel the surety of their presence here, full of eddies and calm shallows to hide in. The sun is barely up, and hopefully that means he hasn't missed the best of the early hours' activity.

On the embankment, the dogs and Hannibal are also calm and still as the shallows of the river, tucked into the shade of a large oak and comfortable on top of a blanket that Hannibal has had the foresight to carry out in his overnight duffel. Despite the length of the leashes and their freedom to roam, both dogs turn into Hannibal's company, who himself has settled with his rarely seen sketchbook. They are content to ignore Will, and Will is relieved to have permission to ignore them in turn.

(*You wish you were settled in with them too. It's not strange looking at things you love from the outside - you're very familiar with it, but you'd sometimes like to be inside too.*)

He casts, and watches the bobber, determined to stay present even as he becomes part of the scenery, a minor detail in a greater drawing. He's not close enough to hear it, but the rustle of wind in the trees can be the sound of broad strokes of charcoal on paper, the mist setting it to permanence.

It's not that something feels wrong as much as it is different when he finally comes to himself and turns his head again. The bobber still dances on the surface of the water, and there's no fish on the line, but he's warm and grounded instead of shocked with the damp cold. The sun has snuck out from behind the clouds. His eyes burn.

Behind him, Hannibal stands close enough to press against him, one arm around his middle, the other carefully handling the crook of his elbow. Nothing about it obstructs the cast of his arm, or his stance in the water, but Will's a big enough man to admit he doesn't know what time it is, other than later, and that he must not be entirely here, there, or anywhere for Hannibal to have gotten this close and for him to not notice. The only reason he doesn't startle is that the embrace is really very calming, a straightjacket he didn't know he was looking for.

"Are you with me again, Will?" he asks, very quiet over the sound of the river at their knees.

"Was I very far away?" Will asks, feeling cotton-headed.

"Not in this river, in any case," says Hannibal, adjusting his feet. "Will you eat something? I think perhaps today we are destined to not catch our quarry."

"What time is it?"

“It’s just after 12:30 pm, and you are standing in the Nehalem River, outside of Tillamook, Oregon.”

Will smiles at the phrase, and a little in relief that it’s not quite as late as last time. Four hours standing idle is a marked improvement. “And my name is Will Graham?” he huffs.

He can’t see it, but he feels Hannibal’s smile in return.

The water current is strong around Will’s boots, where the gravel of the riverbed has sunk under his weight. It’s not quite so bad in the shadow of Hannibal’s own boots, cutting the worst of the drag. It’s a simple kindness to mind him in the cold water until he becomes aware again. For half a moment, Will feels guilty - how uncomfortable the older man must be, standing with numb feet, waiting for Will’s sorry ass to realize maybe he is sick after all. (*You suppose losing time isn’t so bad if someone literally holds your hand through it. You could use some hand-holding for once.*)

There’s not much to suggest that fishing’s getting much better today, but maybe if he switches bait and lures, they can still manage a couple of trout and have something to show for the drive. If he shakes the stiffness from his knees and blinks off the feverous gaze, it’s a salvageable afternoon. If he can play at normal for an hour or two, he can obsess about what this means and what he should do later.

“A little bit longer,” Will says, pulling the line back towards himself, numb-handed and tired. From behind him, Hannibal nods, but doesn’t leave the water. His arm is very warm even through Will’s shirt and waders, and Will makes an effort to explain what he’s doing when he switches out the tackle and bait with shaky fingers.

They don’t end up with another salmon, but they do end up with a very early season hatchery-marked steelhead, only discernible by a small clip in the dorsal fin. It’s somewhat lucky, since he would have to throw it back otherwise. Will hasn’t personally had the privilege of landing this particular catch before, and he has to admit he’s a bit proud of it. He takes a bad photo of it, sends it to Beau, and ends up sending another one with more close-up details. It’s probably the most satisfied he’s been with something for months. Hannibal listens

politely when Will explains the finer details of the scales and range, smiling even as he cleans up his little campsite with the dogs in measured folds and packing.

It's somewhat fortuitous that Hannibal with the dogs and his duffel actually get to the car more easily than Will with his ice-filled cooler for the fish, because it means that when a black, mud-covered truck pulls up behind them, it's only Will and the open back side of the car that greet Edmund Ferris, in his full khakis, looking for all the world like he's looking for an excuse.

(*It doesn't really matter what the excuse is for - you know people like that. You're related to one.*)

"Graham," he yells, "Didn't know this was you. Thought some dumbass might have gotten lost when I drove by earlier and saw it here. You good?"

"It's a campground, Ferris," Will says with a huff. "It can't be the first time you've seen a car on the road near it, having lived here your whole life and all that," he continues, and god, it is a struggle to not condescend.

"Ain't nothing, ain't nothing," Ferris says lightly while waving a hand in front of himself, warding off Will's irritation. "Y'all just looked stuck back here in your fancy car, and I've already had to chase off hikers down the way on the Salmonberry River. Thought you were some kind of tourist. Don't you drive some kind of shitty Volvo?"

"My car, not his," Will says with a shrug, pointing back to Hannibal who's rolled down the windows, and offers a mild handwave and a polite look to Will, waiting for some kind of indication to introduce himself. Will just shakes his head once, firm. "Just trying to divide the work a bit while showing him the area," Will adds, turning to nod his head to the pole in the back of the car. "Took your recommendation to go up the Wilson last time, but the brambles don't make for good introductions to river fishing, so here we are."

"You catch anything?" asks Ferris, spitting between his teeth and lip. It makes Hannibal frown from the driver's seat, but Will is actually a little impressed by it, watching the distance it covers into the brush next to the road and the brazenness of it. It's the kind of thing he wanted to be able to do as a teenager. The kind of thing that makes his father smile. He doesn't know if Hannibal has an equivalent, or would want one. (*Maybe you're Hannibal's -*

a familiar curiosity laden with strange and unsavory habits, made charming by the way you smile when you do them.)

“Steelhead,” says Will, opening his white cooler and grabbing the fish by the mouth to show him.

In an appalling power grab, Ferris hooks the fish with a finger by the mouth too, pulling it out of Will’s hand and turning it to look at the clipped fin. Will is practically agape with speechlessness, and tries not to make eye contact with Hannibal in the rear view mirror from the open trunk of the car. Ferris hums when he sees the fish properly - likely irritated by his lost opportunity to give Will a hard time.

“Good size for this time of year,” he says, handing it back. “Grills nice on charcoal.”

“Yeah,” says Will, only a little incredulous with a laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind. First time for me, so pretty happy with the result. It’s not a salmon, but I appreciate the recommendations so far.”

Opportunity shot, Ferris waves them off, climbing into his black pickup truck. He idly mentions seeing him at the shop, and to enjoy their catch, and watch out for the evening rain. Will just shakes his head, ices his fish again , and loads it into the car where the dogs idly sniff at the lid of it before settling onto their own spot.

When they pull away from the side of the road, and head back on the highway, Hannibal cracks his neck, like he’s been holding it in like blast doors holding back shockwaves. Will knows the sound at this point for what it is - a rare tell, likely dropped deliberately because how many times will Hannibal allow Will to intervene? How many trespasses can one person make before “they had a rough childhood” or “they’re probably depressed” or “everyone is rude when they’re late” stop being adequate excuses?

“An interesting character, your Mr. Ferris,” he says blandly. “A proper greeting would be in order next time, I think.”

“You’re not really missing anything. Edmund Ferris is a jerk. That’s just how some folks are made,” Will replies.

“In the image of tunelessly bleating sheep?” asks Hannibal, a shade too light, but his hands are relaxed. This is good - maybe Will can relax too.

“In the image of god if we circle back to your own thoughts on people enacting violence,” Will cuts in. “His kind is just the petty, personal kind. Learned traits from unfulfilled backgrounds. It was a pretty mild encounter for him,” Will says with a shrug, watching the trees glide past his window and blinking away another headache from the speed of the scene rushing by. (*Please, let that be all that it is.*) “I’m used to it,” he sighs. “All things considered, he’s better than having Kade Purnell and HR up my ass, even if he is an absolute shit.”

Hannibal lets it go. Will’s work here is done, or so he hopes.

(*Begin your count, Will. This marks a first trespass.*)

On the way home, Hannibal asks to make a detour. Assuming the detour isn’t trying to find a black truck in a land absolutely rife with black trucks to continue their earlier conversation, Will thinks he’s game for Hannibal’s addition.

It’s a very curious ask for Hannibal. There’s a curiosity he’s seen on the side of the road in one of his own weekday drives to and from the Portland area and Tualatin Valley that he’s not felt he had the time to stop and see. It’ll add an hour or so onto their drive back into Astoria, but hell, Will has at least one fish today as a result of Hannibal’s willingness to freeze his feet for a couple extra hours and be accosted by the town couth-mouthed blowhard, so an hour of time isn’t really much to request of him. When Will thinks to ask what it is to begin with, Hannibal has a crooked smile, like he’s been waiting to tell him all day.

“Five star water from a small county highway cistern?” Will laughs. “Pull the other one.”

“Truly, I said the same thing, but a conversation with a barista in the city has me convinced that you should try everything once, and more specifically brew an Ethiopian roast at least once with this water,” Hannibal says with a nod, hands at the steering wheel as Will sinks into the warmed seats. In the passenger space behind them, the dogs have curled next to each other to sleep.

“We can end our day on a more positive note,” he adds.

“Or one with dysentery,” says Will lazily.

“Then it is good that you know at least one person that will grant you access to powerful antibiotics in the event that this is a fool’s errand for better coffee, out of personal and professional embarrassment.”

Will hums his amusement. “You’re way beyond professional embarrassment,” he sighs, and dozes against the window.

It truly is right off the road, this little water spigot of Hannibal’s, just a mossy concrete block with a tap out the side of it. Most surprising is the queue of three cars parked ahead of them next to it, filling empty gallon jugs like it’s the last source from here to some apocalyptic future. The two of them only have a couple of water bottles and a slick metal canister presumably for the coffee water between them, so while waiting for the elderly couple in caftans in front of them take damn near 15 minutes filling their cooler and two storage tanks, Hannibal and Will take all of 30 seconds.

While Hannibal fills, Will watches, clear river water coming from the well-maintained tap, something clear out of a car trip with his dad between homes, or a rest stop between crime scenes across state lines. It’s unremarkable, but from a quick map search on his cell phone, sure enough, dozens and dozens of five star reviews, promising superior alkalinity, cleanliness, and good health. It’s like a municipal works cryptid, trapped in the forests of Oregon. No wonder it struck Hannibal’s fancy.

When Hannibal hands him his refilled plastic water bottle, brimming with frigid water, he holds up his own. “Bottoms up,” he says, “or bottoms down, depending on the bacterial

culture," he adds with a straight face.

They cheers each other as amused as any other day at the bar or at home between projects. He's thirsty, and that's the best kind of attitude to have when drinking mystery water, but sure enough it's crisp and fresh.

It's been a little fuzzy and at times absurd, but it's a good day.

Between rainy days, fishing in the nearby pierside shallows for practice, and listening to the sea lions while Hannibal sketches from the pier benches, and a thermometer that doesn't register anything worth talking about encephalitis, Will gets comfortable. Hannibal, always the considerate player of chess that he is, wisely keeps his opinion to himself and tries to be nearby like he's not entirely obvious. But Will's not sick enough to see a doctor - or at least he doesn't feel like it. Concern about illness gets overtaken by Christmas ornaments in downtown, and turns to conversations of Winter weather, and if Hannibal will extend his sabbatical for another quarter of the year. These conversations Will holds his breath through, as though passing through a tunnel for good luck.

Will makes a decision one afternoon after work, pulling into the docks where the big yellow umbrella and the dogs greet him long before he can see Hannibal's face, that maybe his shy maiden bullshit has gone on a little too long, and that Hannibal, having not industriously butchered the countryside, is safe to introduce to people in more than passing. (*Maybe that will keep him here. Maybe that will amuse him until the next opportunity.*)

"Do-you-want-to-meet-Lori-and-Frank?" he rushes out, when he awkwardly joins Hannibal on the dock.

"Come again?' Hannibal replies.

"Lori and Frank. The people I work with. They're going to their usual watering hole tonight," he says, looking down at the lines tying Daisy to the dock. "Do you want to come with me? If

you can keep yourself from referring to the beer as piss and commenting on the singular qualities of working class America anyway."

Hannibal doesn't do anything obviously emotive - he's always been very careful to restrain anything that Will could interpret negatively, which is unfortunate because Will's pretty sure he could read bad portents in his spreading jam too quickly on a scone if he was in the mood for doom and gloom. In this case, he raises an eyebrow. "Do I often go on about such things?" he asks, pocketing a pencil and closing his sketchbook with a snap.

"The way a historian does about the Great Depression, yes. Do you want shitty beer in a dimly lit bar?" asks Will again. "Just making sure you know what to expect."

"Sounds enchanting. I expected only the finest," Hannibal says in classic form, but accepts with the insistence that he be allowed to go change clothes first. Will prays he doesn't switch out for a plaid suit. Will also prays for patience, that he may be able to grant it to Hannibal, who will need to suffer some annoyance in the name of the locals. Lori's always in fine form when her nails are newly painted.

They meet outside the dive bar, Will still in his oiled jumpsuit with a big ugly grey cardigan over the top of it. He is comfortable, warm, and thankfully completely unapproachable in his outfit. Hannibal gives him a once over, seems to ponder if there is a god, and tells Will that he's never seen a more disparate but fitting pair of clothing articles in his life. Will sticks his hands in the pockets of his cardigan, pulls his hair back in a messy bun, and tells Hannibal that this is what he'd signed up for, like he signed up for something to begin with.

Hannibal has recognized the evening's prompt for what it is - an opportunity to make an impression on Will's very limited social circle, which he does in typical Hannibal Lecter style. Black on black on black almost render him almost harmlessly neutral, save the glint of silver buckles on his shiny shoes that lend him a villainous quality. Will's totally not ambiguously gay friend, who likes manly man things, like woodcutting, hunting, and long walks in the woods by moonlight with accompanying string quartet and arranging bodies like florists arrange lilies. Or whatever it is Hannibal wants to make jokes about tonight.

(*Does Hannibal think of himself in simple terms like that? Does he really limit himself in any appetite, sexual, aesthetic, or culinary alike? You think not. You think he'd laugh at you even trying to categorize it.*)

Lori thinks he hung the moon, even as Frank gives him a critical eye.

“Seems like a lot of work, re-doing that old brokedown shack Graham bought,” Frank mutters, taking in a long drag of a cigarette. Will, apologetically glancing to Hannibal, does the same. “Was thinking he was just keepin’ it for tax purposes, he spent so long sleepin’ on Daisy.”

“Oh my goodness Will, why have you been keeping him from me?” Lori asks, already three beers deep by the time they go inside. “You went to med school, cook, and speak four languages fluently? You’re in the wrong place, bud.”

Hannibal smiles, perfectly smooth where Will would have already been peeling the label off his own beer bottle. (*You’re doing it now on his behalf - it’s a waste of nervous energy to leave a label unmolested.*) He has a remarkable patience with her, even as she does her industrious best to imply that her house is really only a little further up the hill than Will’s. Will, never having been the pointlessly jealous type, and not knowing if he even has a basis to be jealous, gives him a facetious thumbs up and receives a withering glare for his troubles.

“Will has been very gracious in giving me an opportunity to get outside of my usual haunts,” Hannibal says, looking Will over a little too pointedly. “It’s been no trouble to help with the house or the dogs in exchange for a change of pace.”

“Showin’ you the river, wasn’t he?”

Will grimaces. From the other end of the bad, Edmund Ferris turns up like a bad penny with a PBR, scratching at his head and dressed like he’s going bushwhacking at the first sign of last call. He's not merited mentioning again since their last excursion out, and Will has had the good fortune to not see him.

Frank, from his stool at the bar, merely swears “Jesus Christ,” like he can’t believe he's done something to earn this. Will heartily concurs. Lori lights a cigarette, her last for the night if the present company stays. One gets tired of misogyny at the bar. However, Hannibal looks like he's seen a particularly curious box, and wants to shake it.

“Ah yes, Mr. Ferris,” says Hannibal, smiling like someone’s reminded him of an errand he’s missed. He really has a talent for casual, charming, innocuous. Will, already halfway through the gold foil of the bottle neck, tears at it more industriously. “I do not believe we had the pleasure of an introduction last week. I believe you were busy being *most* diligent in your duties.”

“Gotta check 'em," Ferris slurs. "S'my job." He turns to Will, giving him a strange look. "Heard about you poppin’ that stupid kid in the eye during the summer,” says Ferris, drunk enough to not recognize meeting someone, or maybe just disinterested. Hannibal, who has been content to listen for the most part this evening, gets the look of an owl that has heard a rabbit in the snow, turning his head towards Will. “Good on you. I hate those stupid out of town shits.”

Will rolls a shoulder, uncomfortable, both at the attention, and the brazen attempt to ignore Hannibal. He can feel the keen interest to his left, like Hannibal is considering a new facet of a stone, both of Ferris and of Will. (*You don't like him knowing about what kind of drunk you are, that you're just as liable to strike as you are to sit still.*) “Didn’t like his attitude, and didn’t really want to keep hearing it.”

“You should have seen him!” Lori says with smile and a hand wrapped around the neck of her beer bottle, dark green for her talons today. “I don’t know how far you go back, but it took damn near half a year for him to even talk at lunch with me, here he was, beating up college kids that wouldn’t know their dick from the Seattle Space Needle. Most flattering thing a guy has done for me since high school.”

Ferris laughs, a little too familiar, but a little too drunk to know the difference. “Graham looks like a fag, but he’s pretty tough stuff when he wants to be. It’s too bad he’s wasting time on that teardown of a house,” he adds, and turns to Hannibal. “Got an honest mean streak in ‘em I can appreciate.”

“As do I,” says Hannibal, watching Ferris with a strange, detached humor. Will wishes the joke wasn’t at his expense. He wishes Hannibal’s eyes weren’t so alien and gold in the neon lights hung over the well drinks. Ferris just slaps Will on the back with a completely unnecessary force, like it’s all a good joke. Will, avoidant of making the situation more awkward than it already is, just shoots his Crown Royal with a lager like he’s back in college, like it doesn’t taste of flat beer, that it’s not inferior to what he’s gotten used to in Hannibal’s company, that Hannibal might have to drag him home if he has much more than this.

Hannibal, next to him and turning his beer bottle in neat, 90 degree turns, looks at Ferris like he's a particularly unpleasant stain on an otherwise clean white shirt, sitting closer to Will than is really what men do in places like this. Will, despite the company and despite ingrained habit, finds he doesn't mind it much.

"Just an awkward guy," says Will on the walk home, as though he's making a difference in Hannibal's mental calculus. "Not many friends, very concerned with appearances."

Well hell, that could be him, Hannibal, and Ferris in a tidy bundle together, couldn't it? Strike two, though, based on Hannibal's strange quiet, even as he pulls the hairband from Will's hair, and tries to wrangle him into the desolation on blankets upstairs to sleep. He's handed two ibuprofen, a glass of water, and exchanges promises to call in the morning.

"Do you really just hate being wrong this much?" Freddie asks, laying rigid and putrid black at the edges of his mattress.

They're both staring at the ceiling in the middle of another night, like it's a sleepover instead of one of the most fucked up visualizations Will has ever experienced. Somewhere against the wall, his phone screen dimly lights the closet door in a dull green. The dogs don't move at all, deeply sleeping against his sides. He closes his eyes, matches his breath to the rise and fall of Winston and Buster's, and tries to imagine Freddie away, somewhere dark and subterranean and not underneath his house.

Of course she can't be real - there's no smell, ergo, no corpse. But the image of her gums pulling away from her sharp, tiny lower incisors, and the cuticles darkening around her rippled fingernails that are folded behind her head is unfailingly accurate to the hundreds of bodies he's watched decompose. He still finds it in him to get frustrated with her casually hanging out in his bedroom with all the spit and vinegar that the living Freddie Lounds would have dealt out. It's a testament to her existence that even in his addled imagination, she's still able to get under his skin.

“What exactly am I wrong about?” he asks in a whisper, stroking the top of Winston’s head, saddled between his left side and his other arm.

“Being sick. There’s always been something wrong with you.”

“You certainly thought so,” he replies, turning from staring at the ceiling to staring at the greyed whorl of her ear, nestled in her hair.

“A lot of people did,” she shoots back, smiling. “Nothing to say any of us are wrong.” The buccinator muscle pulls away from near her ear, and her mouth goes slack, like he’s struck the side of her head all over again.

Will counts down from 100, praying to his heart to slow. He took his pills. He drank a glass of water. He ate a respectable dinner. He drank a little before bed, but nothing worth remarking on. Hannibal has gone home for the night, because Will is a grown man who can sleep by himself, and doesn’t want the other man thinking he can just...clear a drawer for his clothes, or whatever the equivalent is when you don’t keep furniture in your bedroom. There’s no reason to feel this terrible.

Like most things, he just has to outlast Freddie. She’s got to decompose beyond the ability to speak someday, encased in concrete or not.

Going to Cannon Beach isn’t really Will’s preference, a little too lone wolf at heart to properly enjoy the town and it’s family-friendly promenade, vacationers' curiosities, and local residents that have either been there since the dawn of fishing the west coast, or recent transplants from California that dream of retiring in some quaint temperate forest village, but can’t picture life without a beach.

(*You can respect that last part, even if you don’t respect the attitudes and wealth of the people who utter it - you can’t picture life without a body of water. You can’t tolerate the hardness of the earth without the smooth, glassy absences of a river or lake, something you can sink into and forget for a little while.*)

For Hannibal, it is a ritual comparable to Will's own morning commute with the bay, taking in a hike at least once a week in the state park, and some manner of overpriced coffee shortly after to go with a morning of clients via video chat and phone calls. Will doesn't ask to go with him, and Hannibal, content to have his own pursuits and career in the absence of time that he can needle at Will, doesn't ask him to.

He makes the mistake of thinking Hannibal is happy with that, and the house, and the other small acts of individuality that make Hannibal himself in this environment as much as Baltimore. Cannon Beach fulfills a similar higher society niche with a flair for the outdoors, and Portland offers the more aesthete pursuits in bold, modernist colors. It by all rights is very comparable - the only thing that's missing is perhaps the opera, and the marauding through the night with a scalpel looking for flesh the way that Caravaggio paints faces in violent contrast.

Today is another indulgence that Will makes for Hannibal, so rare are his actual requests for Will to do anything that he hasn't explicitly volunteered himself for. (*Otherwise, Hannibal is more likely to follow you, like you're the one with an exciting schedule, and he wants to watch it as a scientist watches cells multiply under millimeters-thin glass. You are either so small that you can't fathom his watching, or he is so careful about it that it disturbs very little of your day.*) Pulling up to the front entry of Ecola State Park, and watching the park ranger wave Hannibal in with his shiny annual pass and chat like she and him are old friends, Will thinks maybe Hannibal makes more of an impact on the Oregon Coast than he really had thought, as if before Hannibal only really exists here when Will can see him at it.

"Making friends?" asks Will, when they pull into a parking space, and begin the long walk down to Indian Beach.

"Simply passing the time," says Hannibal. "You are a difficult hiking partner to secure, and I find that it's best to remember familiar faces. They have a tendency to remember me in turn," he says with palms turned up.

"You're a hard person to forget," says Will, sighing through his nose against the incoming wind. He wishes he had brought the dogs. He appreciates the distraction that they engender.

“You made an honest effort not so long ago,” Hannibal replies with a turn of the head into the wind directly. It ruffles his hair out of place, gathering silver in web-like strands. He’s always slick in appearance, but even to Will, it looks a little longer than his usual starched and pressed fare. “It took no small amount of effort to ensure you were unsuccessful.”

Oh, but that’s not right. Will’s never forgotten; he’s only shelved it like people put old photos in closets, or stored a valuable thing away where they can’t see it right now. Will has his father’s coin, his mother’s salt and pepper shakers, and a series of unhealable physical defects in his nervous system and emotional dependency from Hannibal, which has been exceedingly inconvenient to forget.

“It wasn’t exactly unchallenging to keep you out of it,” says Will. “Arguably you are still the most challenging thing about my life.”

Hannibal smiles, even as the gravel crunches wetly underfoot, and they march on past the wind-ravaged pines on the coast, slowly descending near to the surf. “A high compliment. Then what’s the next thing to challenge you with, when there’s naught but fishing, planting hedgerows, walking dogs, and revarnishing the chair rails?”

“I have you,” he says, feeling a little small.

“Are you content with that?” asks Hannibal. (*The real question; is* he *? How bored he must be - a great big jungle cat in a cage.*) “Do you simply wish to convalesce for the rest of your days? You can do anything. Even from the confines of prison, you were able to engrave your image,” and this he says fervently, something important to him even as Will’s eyes drift to Hannibal’s covered wrists. “I have the marks to prove it.”

Will flinches at that. He is often embarrassed by the memory of it. He has also wanted to take them in hand and admire them, like it’s an incomplete work.

They walk in relative silence for a time, navigating brackish water and timber stairs, reddened in the damp weather and stained from years worth of tannins and pine needles. Below, the waters are loud against the boulders and tide rocks. It’s similar to the Cape, but cupped on either side by cliffs, like hands held over an ear to amplify the sound. Stepping into the sands, Will thinks it a very lovely place to listen and be nothing for a moment. By contrast, Hannibal to his left is as permanent and present as the stone.

After a few waves break and fall back, Will clears his throat.

“I’m not going to pretend *you’re* content,” he says, watching foam pop against the tiny pebbles at the edge of the sand. “You’ve had a very grand lifestyle for most of your life. You don’t crave normalcy - you’re repelled by it, or at least the constancy of it. Not enough variety in your diet,” Will continues, striding forward slowly until the sand is wet at his feet.

“But I’ve been wanting something...I guess stable since I was a kid, and the thing that usually gets in the way of that these days is me," he shrugs. "Can’t blame old Beau, he’s on the other side of the continent most days. Can’t blame Jack Crawford, he’s probably one lawsuit away from losing his own job,” Will continues with a sigh. “And I blamed you. I should still blame you,” he says with a glance over to Hannibal, who pays no attention to the sea at all, only Will. There’s a pinching kind of pain, somewhere beneath his ribs. “You made every effort to reduce me to my worst parts, and then rebuild them, like I was just in the wrong order, not a fully formed person.”

He turns away again. “You offer me interesting thoughts and convictions and belonging, and it becomes my duty to turn them down, because you can’t have normalcy in the same bed as assumed supremacy over other people. So, either I try to become something more grandiose than I am to live up to your expectations,” he explains, “or I ask you to be satisfied with a lesser life.”

Will’s always been afraid of the realities of his relationships, if he can call this one - he’s never thought he’s a very unselfish partner, despite his painful understanding of his partner’s feelings. (*That forced difference again.*) “I’m as happy as I know how to be here. It’s funny, they call the mouth of the Columbia the ‘Graveyard of the Pacific’,” he says with a shrug. “Maybe I’ve found somewhere to finally sink into,” he finishes, and admires the blue-green iridescence of an abalone shell at his feet. Anything but look back up.

He doesn’t end up needing to - Hannibal simply enters his space until he is right up against him from behind, a mirror to holding Will in place in the flow of the river. It’s as safe a place now as it was then. It takes him a few more ebbs of the waves to find his voice, measuring what he wants to say. There’s always cutting honesty when he does that. It’s reassuring this time to be deconstructed. (*It helps you understand a man in the habit of not being understood. How tiring, explaining yourself time and time again and failing to connect each time. You can’t understand the self-righteousness and the theater of his life, but you can understand* **that** .)

“You’ve spent your life flowing from location to location, and your malleable nature has ensured that you grew despite the unstable upbringing you had, and difficulty connecting with the rest of the world as an adult,” he says, fingers pressing at Will’s sides. “Your empathy made you grow towards light, even as it burned you - but it is your intellect and singularness as a man that ensured you could be what you are today.”

There’s a mist with the waves this close to the rocks, gathering into beads until they are drops. Will can see them on the sleeves of his coat, rolling onto Hannibal’s before being lost to the sand.

“The world’s full of broken men, Will,” he adds. “Anyone other of your background would statistically be an addict, doing blue collar contract work, or emotionally stunted. But here you are,” he whispers into Will’s curls, “striking out against normalcy, for all that you seem to crave it.”

“Then I’m batting a perfect game,” Will laughs, soaking in the feeling of warm breath in his hair even as the sea wind chaps his cheeks with cold. “I’d argue I’m doing all three.”

“One wonders what you are addicted to,” he feels in measured hot breaths, smiled into his skull.

“I suspect we have different answers,” he replies, and promises himself not to clutch at the arms at his waist.

“You flow from watershed to watershed because you have the kineticism of liquid,” Hannibal continues with an aggravating surety that Will just...doesn’t confidently feel. “It’s a gift of your empathy - a capacity for constant change, to fit whatever container you’re in, or to flow onwards into another basin. I do not believe you are inclined to sit stagnant, given what I know of you.”

“Water becomes tributaries to bigger bodies of water,” Will says after a moment’s pause. “Have you considered I’m just slowly diluting out into something stable?”

(*He doesn't respect emotions, but he respects physics. Let him kick* that *around in his head for a while.*)

Hannibal seems at a loss for words for once, watching the waves crush the shore over and over again, eroding it. There's a metaphor here, but Will doesn't really know who's eroding who in it, and which is the bigger sin. Hannibal has always seemed larger than life that Will has no concept of changing him, only that he has in some ways.

In reverse, well that's obvious. The Will before Hannibal is unrecognizable from the one after, though both share fathers and a fervent wish to feel at home in their own skin. All that's left behind is the hardest materials that can't be washed out, buried but always present.

Hannibal makes challah bread with a fluffy center and beautiful browned butter crust for him with a side of french onion soup for dinner in the high-ceilinged comfort of the flat, and goes on to make a complex beef tartare with crispy round crostinis for himself, with beds of arugula and shining sour cranberries that are softened by a brown cream sauce.

They turn the conversation to Lewis and Clark, and their good fortune to encounter clemence instead of savagery, for all that the history books painted otherwise. They do not talk about fluid dynamics, state parks, and unmatched expectations.

They turn again at some unspecified point to Hannibal's bedroom, where Hannibal undresses him like he opens a book, assured where he left off, anxious to read more. This is somewhere that the day gets left behind, and there's no injustices for a brief window of time. Hannibal treats his attention with dedication, and in turn, Will can turn Hannibal's hands in his own, and love them as something that brings him ecstasy, not pain. It's not that Will is overwhelmed by the force of Hannibal's attention in these times, but instead saturated as roots take in rain.

Will feels very easily read and transparent tonight, skin chilled by the night air and warmed again by the press of Hannibal's fingers until they bruise, like Will might disappear if he doesn't hold on. The only way to keep him is to crawl so far inside his chest that Hannibal lives there, nestled as comfortably as an organ and every bit as necessary.

(*You let him because it feels good. You want him to because it's true.*)

Will doesn't go to sleep immediately that night, walking back to the house a little sore but aggressively well used, like Hannibal could just cut his name into Will's skin, and all the trouble of the day would be forgotten because he'd have a claim the way miner's have claims on veins of ore.

He opens the front door and avoids the stairs up, standing in the basement. He is directly atop the fresh shiny grey of the concrete that fills the septic pit, where five feet further down, Freddie Lounds is likely in active decay.

It's been nearly six months since he's swung the spanner wrench. Six months since he burns his wrists with concrete that slides up over his nitrile gloves, hastily mixing and shoveling the slurry over the bright blue of a tarp wrapped tight with all 112 pounds of Freddie, more clothing than woman, more tongue than form. Six months tearing out his kitchen cabinets and rebuilding around them. Six months from scattering her trail, and pretending at calm when every day that passes brings greater surety - *I've gotten away with it. I've gotten away with it.*

It was satisfying to know that no one except Hannibal thought to even ask him. He's capable of more. He doesn't think about it often - how his one opportunity to live out that *thing* everyone wants him to dive into was an event of pure practicality. He doesn't have Hannibal's sense of stylistic flair, but he does have a sense of purpose, and the purpose of others. The design of Freddie's death is imperfect. He could do better. He will next time.

Try, try again?

Is it worth destroying what little life he's made here to do it again, because the brief surge of energy that rises in the wakes of his righteous violence justifies it? And does he really think Hannibal will fall into the same toothless, tasteless existence and be happy with that? There's a strange appeal in watching the same hands that treat the edges of his ears, the knobs of his

spine, and tops of his feet with the reverence of a holy pilgrim instead turn to split the flesh instead. His. Someone else's. Does it really matter whose?

(*Yes. No.*)

And what would Will do, really, if Hannibal decides one day that the Ripper misses ripping? How many times will he run interference on small arguments, little rudenesses, playing defence for largely indefensible people? Oh sure, death and dismemberment is an extreme punishment for cutting the queue at the grocery store, but where does Will get off calling the shots? He doesn't think Hannibal is God, but neither is he, and everyone dies by the condition of being born.

What did Freddie do, other than wander into his house as is her nature, sliding from opening to opening, looking for morsels to consume? What is Hannibal, or Will even, other than the animal at the other end of the hole, waiting patiently for an opportunity?

(*You know another is coming. There's a coppery taste in your mouth, like a battery on your tongue, full of potency and potential to do harm.*)

He runs his hands over the surface of the fresh concrete. There are no cracks - only the splotches of curing stone. Will thinks there's a magnetism to it all the same, drawing him down to lay with Freddie the same way she comes out at night to lay with him. He stays up until he's too tired to fight sleep, and too tired to dream.

The third trespass of Hannibal's patience isn't quite an accident, or so Will comes to think. Will marks it as significant, because of all the times that he's seen the black monster that Hannibal has carefully stitched into a quiet spot behind his suit, and his charming banter, and his consuming attention that has usually been paid to Will since arriving in Astoria, it is the first time that Will thinks that he doesn't have control of the situation anymore.

(*You've never had control of the situation. It's why you can't sleep at night.*)

Hannibal doesn't come around Will's work. It's never really spoken of, or even asked for, but once Will gets on his boat, the day only opens to Hannibal again once Will arrives at the docks in the afternoon. They text, but other than the one time Hannibal brings Will his wallet, he respects this one thing. It's really quite singular in that regard. Hannibal has no expertise with boat repairs to make his presence justifiable, and seems to understand Will uses his job as an almost meditative practice.

The occasional acceptance of food at the flat, however, has changed how Hannibal approaches the subject of lunches, turning to make things that Will has historically not been suspicious of, and might have a greater chance of crossing the bridge line between Astoria and Warrenton uneaten by the birds. He was able to manage a vegetarian plating for Freddie Lounds, and he actually likes Will, which leads to an early December exploration of cheeses and vegetables in dinners and boxed leftovers.

Following the night at the bar, Lori constantly asks after Hannibal, like Will's been hiding him in the bushes or locks him in a closet during the day. If anyone is locked in a closet, it's Will, unable to really give voice to Hannibal's presence in his life. (*Arguably, you take the less masculine role in the relationship, content to be doted on and made to feel small in a way that's safe instead of emasculating. He does the traditionally feminine hobbies, but all you want is to hide in his biting affections, and pretend it doesn't have significance because that requires reflection, and accountability.*) So when he finally does appear, she's only too happy to greet him.

Incidentally, it's mid-afternoon on a Friday, and Hannibal has made him lunch, enough to share with more than just Will. He hadn't handed it off on their morning walk, because apparently Hannibal makes house calls now to the shop, and that makes Will crazy thinking about *why* that is. Is he being manipulated into accepting it in front of other people? Did he honestly just make something warm and want to share?

(*He's a Rube Goldberg machine of extreme complexity, but he is also obsessive in his uncomplicated insistence on providing service. Which one is anyone's guess given the day - you think he likes that, keeping you on your toes.*)

But Ferris is also here today, sitting in the corner on a plastic chair, waiting for a part from the back, and that feels purposeful in a way that small mistakes feel purposeful to Will when profiling, and wearing the skin of other men. When the ranger sees Hannibal roll up with his Range Rover, he immediately snorts, like it's completely unbelievable, that he's forgotten that

he saw Will and Hannibal in it barely even two weeks ago. It seems like a stupid thing to get hung up on, but some people never get past their disdain for wealth or comfort. Beau is like that. He can only imagine what Beau really thought of Hannibal after a night in his company. Will has gotten used to Hannibal's particulars with taste, and Hannibal has been happy to laugh off most people's envy and prejudice as long as they're not hateful about it.

At the sound of Ferris' nasal laugh, Hannibal takes his focus off Will and Lori at her desk, and watches Ferris for a moment before continuing to the counter.

"I apologize for the break in routine, but I have something simple for you that I hope you'll take - a few ricotta calzoni with capers and cherry tomatoes, since it's getting late in the day. I had intended to make an orzo dish tonight at the flat to make the walk to the whiskey bar a little lighter, but I dislike the idea of not tempering a drink with a good meal."

From her desk, Lori's bleach blonde hair appears, pushing paperwork away from her. "Ugh, Graham, get him to make me some of those," she says, throwing her head back with a sigh and picking up a stack of receipts. "Are they still warm?"

Hannibal smiles, and Will takes the insulated bag with a twist of a smile himself, caught for the time being. Cherry tomatoes. Cheese. Capers. These are probably ok. Hannibal is usually more subtle than this, but he pushes more boundaries with Will in public these days when it's impersonal, always pleased when he's red and embarrassed. Taking it to the office is a test that Will didn't really study for, or know how to respond to. He likes and doesn't like it.

"Really, Graham? Italian food for lunch, hand delivered by your 'renovation partner'? Pretty gay, even for you."

Will tenses, and holds his breath. The intention is to rattle, not to offend, but he feels the offence anyway, from himself and from the man to his side. Indeed, Hannibal takes it dead seriously. He watches the other man's eyebrow raise from a frown to a perfectly smooth mask with glittering eyes. His most polite smile raises the corners of his mouth, looking for all the world like cracks in an ice shelf.

"Are you often scandalized by people bringing lunches, or is your perception of intimacy so unclear that the simple act of making food for a friend becomes cause for gay panic?" he drawls, all of the vowels dragged across the floor.

Ferris bristles, but laughs again. “Y'all implying something? If it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck,” he says, shrugging. “I took you for a tourist looking for directions back out to the state park, maybe a seasonal visitor after the bar, but you know what?" he says with a snort. "I reckon I see two ducks here. Christ Graham, I thought a lot bette rof you. All that small town Southern kid shit just for show, or did your daddy do ya wrong like some trailer park trash?”

"Well that's rich, coming from you," mutters Will from grit teeth. "Projection, even." Hannibal, if anything, gets more still, smiles wider. Will feels the muscles in his neck flex, normally calm in the face of insults, but aggravated by the implication. He’s afraid to feed into the pool of Hannibal’s anger - he doesn’t have Hannibal’s patience to match it. (*Goodness, there are a lot of tools here, but also a lot of witnesses. You don't have to manage one of them, only make sure he doesn't make it worse, but how inconvenient, don't you think?*)

Lori, normally content to ignore Ferris’ abuse as a long time target of it, starts standing. “Jesus, Ed, it's just lunch, and even if it wasn't, it don’t matter either way as long as we’re doing good work. I think-”

Ferris waves his hands, like he has a dozen times before. "You don’t think much at all, Lori, so why don't you sit your ass down. This is why having all the newcomers is shit. Less discerning, less like the people who know the place.”

“Ah yes, Astoria, the very pinnacle of discerning residents and tastes, with all the range of a five key xylophone.” Hannibal says lightly. Will feels a flash of irritation with this, even as Ferris sneers.

“I’ve lived here all my life, know it better than most, front from back.” Standing, Ferris moves to the front door, contemplating Hannibal before looking at Lori. “You wanna call me when you got my shit? I need to get back to doing my job. This is a long ass time to wait for a goddamn depth sensor.”

“And what a fine job you do,” Hannibal adds.

Ferris makes a gesture like firing a gun while walking out the door with a smile and a jaunty wave from the parking spots, but Will doesn't see this quite the same. Will sees his relatively calm existence start disintegrating, even as his own temper reddens his face and brings the pulse of blood to his hands, resolutely at his sides.

Hannibal is unmoving until Ferris' black truck pulls out of the parking lot, eyes following.

Lori tries to apologize. "You know we aren't like that around here," she explains, turning from Hannibal to Will to Hannibal again, not quite sure who's taken the greater offense. Will tries to placate her, apologizing for any sort of misunderstanding, for making her nervous, for being loud. He doesn't fully know what he should be saying, torn between a cold fury and anxiousness and the burn of a piercing headache that he wishes he could just box up for later when he can deal with it.

"Not to worry, Miss Hansen," Hannibal says with a thin mouth, after a few moments have passed. His eyes are very dark and blank. "It means nothing to me, but I do wish he would leave Will out of his misunderstanding. Food is a delicate subject."

"Please don't," says Will, first thing when pulling into the harbor, Winston and Buster's wagging tails a joyful contrast to Hannibal all in black, watching Will's face grow closer.

"Don't what?" asks Hannibal, dry and breathless, but firm. Desert-like.

"Please don't do anything," says Will. "Please don't make life any more difficult than it needs to be. I know you enjoy complication the way a baker enjoys overdressing a wedding cake, but the guy's just a weird, uneducated asshole, not the antichrist."

Hannibal is very blank. Not a calculating kind, but absorptive, as though he's had to find a mode of learning that separates his distaste from the conversation.

“I’m sorry you got involved,” Will adds, taking Winston’s leash from Hannibal. The bright red nylon threads look neon in the whiteness of his hands, clenched hard enough to showcase every rise and fall of bone there. “But please, let this one sink.”

(*Please understand that you need your life to be normal for once. Please understand this is a small thing in a history of unkindnesses you’ve suffered. Please understand, that no matter how you many times you see, appreciate, and cherish the image of your father smashing that man’s face for speaking to you with the ugliness of adults, the blooming wounds of Garret Jacob Hobbs’ shoulder, the elegant, cutting insight of Hannibal’s mind running against yours like a lathe until you’ve been shaped into something grotesque but functional, you crave the ability to hide away from it, and hold onto some sense of identity that you’ve shaped for yourself. You told him. You* told *him.*)

(*Please understand that you have gotten used to a lot of uncertainties and tried to forgive a closet-full of wrongs to accept Hannibal’s strange version of love, but never have you ever forgotten what he’s capable of.*)

Hannibal, with Buster’s blue leash in his own hand, comfortably loose in juxtaposition to Will’s own anxiousness, smiles and steps close to press his mouth to the temple of Will’s forehead, not really a kiss, but something affectionate.

“*Mon coeur*,” he sighs, fingers idle at the base of Will’s neck. “It shall be as if it never was.”

They go out for dinner tonight, and act like nothing happened over shellfish and gin. Hannibal says he doesn't feel like cooking for once, and keeps his attention squarely on Will until walking him home for the night. Regardless if it's true, Will has to admit he can't read Hannibal if Hannibal doesn't want to be read. Will can't even try it over the cold burning behind his eyes.

act 5 - what has been will be again

Chapter Notes

I lied, it wouldn't all fit in two chapters, so we're going up to 20 now.
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He dreams he’s in the new bathroom, dipped in the inky blackness of the full tub. The water is ice cold, and something is holding his neck up, grasping at the hair there. Firm, but gentle, like being held by the cradling permanence of a large stone. His eyes are dry and ache terribly, and the crushing presence of a headache hides just behind his half-open gaze.

To his left, in the impossible space between the window and the wall, the massive head of the stag leans against him, breathing ripples onto the water’s surface, forge-hot on his shoulder. It looks as miserable as he feels, the curious red of it’s pupil all the more vivid as the white of his eyes crease the edges, wide and mad.

To his right, Hannibal’s lean arm is balanced on the marble edge, sleeve rolled up to his elbow where his arm is wet and venous. Will spies one of his scars, and wishes he could tear it open again.

The lights are off, so he can’t really get a good idea of the time, but with the certainty he feels putting his hands down for the dogs to push their heads against, he pushes his hand now towards the stag to feel the coarseness of black hair and feathers, carded between bony fingers and pruned skin.

“You’re not doing very well, Will,” Hannibal says from behind him, close enough for his lips to touch the tip of his ear. His breath is minty, but warm like summer.

“Everyone likes to tell me that,” he rasps, shaking.

He wakes up in bed, a little damp with sweat, but under the blankets and cold. Winston lays on top of his legs while watching him with watery eyes in the dark. Buster, from the glow of the low hall lights, stands vigilant just outside the bedroom. He must have been thrashing and startled them.

Will takes two ibuprofen and drinks it with a glass of water, making a note to leave work early and talk to a doctor that isn't Hannibal. He's suspicious of the bathroom and what feels like the softened burn of a fever, but he's too tired to get up and check on his doubts, and Winston seems to have settled in with his head on Will's knee. Will feels the acute guilt of having disturbed them. By morning, the tub is dry and there's nothing to do save shower away the sourness of his night terrors. Hannibal acts no different from any other morning, passing him coffee, and asking if he slept well. Will feels stupid for thinking he might have done something, but discreetly looks up local general practitioners anyway from a directory, just in case. He'll have to go to Longview - that's ok.

He schedules an appointment for early January. The holidays make it hard to get in for standard office hours, and Will's not quite to the point of being ready to accept another exorbitant emergency room bill when this could just be standard, crazy Will. "Just let us know if you start having worsening symptoms," says the receptionist. "We're all booked up, but we'll give you a call if anything opens up."

"Thanks," he says. "Don't want to make a big deal out of nothing, but I've got the history, and figured it's worth checking," he adds, the refrain for every doctor's visit he's ever scheduled for himself, like it erases the anxiety to allow for the possibility of it being all a big misunderstanding.

Will doesn't hear anything else about Edmund Ferris in the following week, other than a near miss in the grocery store as he muses on if Hannibal would be ok with navel oranges, or if getting caracara ones is somehow magnificently important to his errand. The gruff man is carrying a shopping basket, every bit as normal and pedestrian as can be expected, and totally oblivious to Will just behind a mound of apples. Will would argue that he's not hiding, but he

really doesn't want any more of a reason to think about what kind of man Ferris is, and barricading himself behind a wall of fruit is better than having to re-examine if Hannibal is earnest in his resolve to let the past go, or if Will should be letting him loose like unhooking a large exotic cat from a tether.

(*And if you give permission once, how far would he push it every time after?*)

It changes a few minor things at the boat shop. Lori is of course the kind of sorry that Will knows is earnest but misplaced, taking opportunities to bitch about the Friday encounter at every turn available. She is also very curious, clearly not having thought of Will as anything but the kind of heterosexual, socially disadvantaged male that Will has worn like a coat of arms during his tenure in the office. Rusty boats and sad looking project houses don't exactly fit the gay man narrative she's accustomed to, even if Hannibal does in some ways, and Will would hardly describe himself as having any particular change in orientation. Accepting the ferrous pull that Hannibal has is less of a sexual thing, and more of an elemental need, but he's hardly inclined to go into that kind of explanatory detail with his gossipy co-worker. How terrible *that* conversation would be.

Frank who only ever hears about it after his lunch break has passed on the day of, just rolls his eyes and calls his buddy at Fish and Game to ask if there's anyone competent that he can get the purchase orders from. "If it don't effect your work, and it don't effect mine, who cares who brings the boats in?" says Frank to Will. "Ferris ain't the one calling the shots on that, for all that he acts like I stole food outta his mouth," Frank grumbles, stacking papers and tapping a cigarette with the irritable old man energy that Will hopes to adopt someday.

So he guesses that's something like coming out, if he has to.

He doesn't mention it to Beau though. That's someone who will care, but only insofar as if Will is happy with the kind of person they are, and Will isn't sure he wants to explain Hannibal when Hannibal has already left the only impression Beau will accept. Better to experience some things in person. Better to wait until he's not convinced that something terrible is going to happen, and explaining why that is doesn't leave Will feeling withdrawn and cold and ready to go to bed so he doesn't have to keep thinking about it.

Hannibal himself doesn't mention the incident again. As a person who's never let a single admission die in an unmarked grave, Will is suspicious of it.

He has a hard time focusing on the rest of his work week. Will oscillates between feeling achy and feeling fine, but for every moment that he feels fine and throws back the candy-coated painkillers, he comes back to the thought of what Hannibal is up to. The appearance is that it's not much, but as a person who can't make poached eggs before first constructing fresh bread and hollandaise to be poured over the top of it all, this feels like a construct and less like the truth of the matter.

He's taken to Christmas card writing, beautiful silver-foiled things with bright holly branches and the silhouette of one of the cape lighthouses on it deep grey and navy. Each card is given excruciatingly thorough written letters on a leaflet of rice paper inside - "It wouldn't do to not give the receiver the appropriate amount of consideration," says Hannibal, fountain pen scratching across in precise penmanship.

(*"The hospital pharmacists had no complaints for me," he also jokes to you, filling out a prescription form for a client earlier in November to forward through photos. You wonder if people with complaints actually last very long.*)

Will doesn't recognize most of the recipients on the occasions he does catch the final versions in their dove grey envelopes. Colleagues, patients, and the occasional closer acquaintance seems to make up the bulk of it. There are a few that go to people that Will *does* recognize, like Alana Bloom, and what an awkward card *that* must be. There's one address that Will knows intimately, because he himself has been procrastinating on getting a card to send to it.

"You're not serious, are you? You know he's just gonna put this on the counter and bury it under a month's worth of coupon flyers and statement bills, right?" asks Will, turning the envelope over and over in his hand, where ***Beau Graham, 916 38th Street, Savannah, Georgia*** sits in Hannibal's impeccable penmanship. There's a kind of distinguished hooked flourish in the serifs, more akin to fencing than writing. Will can already imagine the water rings on the unopened card already, trapped under half-emptied water bottles and a can of ground coffee.

Hannibal, finishing off a line, looks at Will with the patient gaze of someone who doesn't really want to explain themselves, but will hear him out. Will finds himself irritated just at the

sight of it, even as Hannibal's mouth lifts at the corners.

"He very generously hosted," says Hannibal, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "A relation of yours, so I understand your hesitation to allow it, but I would send a card regardless. It's considerate."

"I've hosted off and one for two months and given you way nicer things to drink than Wild Turkey," Will says with a laugh, considering creasing the edges of the envelope with a fingernail. Something that says, *Will was here, you know, your boy Will* , that Beau can see as his mark. "Are you going to write me one?" Will finds himself asking, turning the address away from himself, instead looking at the tidy gold wax seal.

Hannibal smiles, dusting the ink of his current letter to dry. "Shall I summarize my year for you as well?" he asks, pulling another leaflet of paper in front of him, another printmaker perfect card to his right.

Will pauses, and looks out the windows to the bridge, obscured again today. "Only if it's honest," he answers.

His hands are twitching, and all WIll can think is "does this constitute a worsening of symptoms?"

It doesn't really hurt, at least not in a noticeable, actionable way. It's just small tics of his fingers, mostly in the left hand, and never for more than a few minutes. He's lucky that he and Hannibal don't actually live together because he doesn't think it would be easy to explain away the growing frequency that he chooses to literally sit on his hands and ignore it, or how often he's starting to spill glasses of water when waking in the mornings, groggy and uncomfortably cold.

But Hannibal is a trauma surgeon at heart, and a psychiatrist in practice, and a detail oriented horror in his passions, and really misses nothing. He also is actively looking for something,

which makes hiding this nearly impossible when the stringent force of his eyes catches a tremor when Will accepts a plate of butternut squash gnocchi with a quiet thank you.

(*Rookie mistake. You should know better than to come out of your hiding space when you feel unwell. How else are you going to quietly slip off to die someday?*)

The plate never really gets to the table, as Hannibal snatches it back like it burns the both of them.

“Put your arms out in front of you,” he demands after setting everything to the side, “perpendicular to your chest, and hold it there.”

“You gonna slap my hands for grabbing the plate like a Catholic school teacher?” Will asks with a half smile, incredulous. Hannibal hardly ever tells him what to do. He’s consistently been more of a persuasive argument kind of arrogant bastard. Hannibal, frowning thinly, just waits for Will to comply.

Will does, but lets out a frustrated huff of air. There’s nothing good about the way that his left hand moves on its own. Hannibal obviously feels the same, breathing slow through his nose putting pressure on different points of Will’s elbow and shoulder to see if it worsens or abates. It unapologetically remains the same.

“I’ve already made an appointment,” Will says, like that will ward off questions. “It’s not like this all the time anyway. I feel fine.”

“Visible neurological symptoms are hardly fine,” Hannibal says, trying again to take Will’s pulse and searching the room for something, likely his medical bag.

Will shakes his head.

Will doesn’t really want to look at blood pressure cuffs, and oximeters, and anything to do with this. He’s got enough pent up anxiety about it to last him through New Years. Three

weeks to go - he can make it three weeks. He wants to eat dinner, either here, or down the street at the diner, and be done with it. Will pulls his arm out of Hannibal's grip, fisting his hands on the tabletop, and determinedly looks down the hallway from the kitchen bar, where a tanker's lights glow on the open water beyond. He does this more harshly than he intends, wrist and hand popping a little with the force of it.

Hannibal just looks at Will for a moment, puzzling him out as one puzzles out foreign letters. His eyes search Will's face, looking back down to Will's hands clenched on the table, and again to Will's mouth and the irritable tilt of it.

"Will you let me do nothing?" he asks quietly. It's a desolate thing.

Will doesn't have an answer. He's afraid it's too broad a question to answer honestly.

When they part for the night, it's only once Hannibal has walked him home in the quiet of the streets, where Will lets his eyes rest and glaze over the Christmas lights on the shops until they are a scattering of stars instead of cheap LED bulbs. It's chilly enough for the eddying white of his breath to fog in his face, and sink into the sweat on his forehead. It stings like little needles at every point, so he wipes it away.

Hannibal doesn't talk, only looks withdrawn and stony. He walks Will all the way into the house, lets the dogs out into the yard, and doles out more ibuprofen from the bottle that Will keeps in the hall bathroom. It's a small thing accomplished, and it does nothing to ease the rigidness out of Hannibal's shoulders.

He smooths down Will's hair, wiping more of the chilled sweat from behind his ears and neck, and says he'll text him in the morning. It's abrupt, but that's ok - Will guesses he has to let Hannibal be frustrated sometimes too. It doesn't feel as good to get under his skin these days this way, but there's still a sense of accomplishment when Will can.

He goes to work in the morning feeling vaguely guilty even with the knowledge that he's not really being unfair. Hannibal very happily performed medical malpractice on him just a year

ago. It's not exactly wrong of Will to not give him another go in this particular arena. His head isn't bothering him with the usual headache this time, and he's able to get through brushing his teeth and showering in tepid water without dropping or spilling anything this morning, so that's good.

Hannibal appears a little bit earlier than usual, watching Will go through his morning ritual, passing off coffees and a tidily wrapped aluminum canister of what he is told is a vegetable stew and a baguette. He offers to drive him to work. Will declines - the sea air is one of the few things that clears his head, and he needs a head clearing the way that he could probably use a lobotomy.

Hannibal nods, like he really didn't expect something else. Nonetheless, Will finds himself somewhat anxious when around mid morning, he gets a text from him.

I am a staunch believer in schedules, but I'll have to beg your pardon today from the afternoon walk to work on a stock for tonight's dinner , it reads.

It's not the first time Hannibal doesn't meet him after work, so that's not particularly off, although certainly the first time he's had six hours notice for it. But then, Hannibal is one for promptness when cancelling plans and entertaining guests, assuming it's a time he wants them to be aware of what's happening. Will can't really count on him minding the dogs every day anyway, nor should he. They're Will's dogs, just as surely as he is Beau's son.

(*You wonder how Hannibal thinks of you. Does he have responsibilities for you these days, like he found you on the side of the road and put a collar on you too, or are you too feral to keep, too shy of domestication to let him help where he knows how?*)

No problem , Will replies.

Will braves the drizzly rain in his ship, slow going and admittedly a little disappointed in the absence of the yellow umbrella when he comes around the long docks to bring Daisy in. He briskly walks up the hill from the harbor and opens the door to the dogs, who seem surprised

that it's him instead of Hannibal and dance around him in delight. It brings a smile to his face, watching them light up. Will greets them with a treat from the secret cabinet hiding spot, which isn't a secret so much as a code word; they know exactly what's in it, and why he's in it. When distracted, he zips them into their rain coats, clips them into their leashes, and manages to coax them out the front door to take in the drizzly grey afternoon.

There's a park on the west side of the big hill, really just a series of ball fields, little concrete paths, and a playground that has water-logged sand more often than not, but it has a nice view of the Youngs Bay Bridge and the water, and he can usually have it to himself in bad weather. He doesn't often drag Hannibal back this way because it's not really for sight-seeing as much as it is for children and families, more neighborhood rooftops and basketball hoops than a landmark. It feels mundane next to Indian Beach, or the rivers of the Clatsop State Forest. It's suburbia, in the most comfortable, typical ways. It's made a good place for him to walk the dogs, and let his thoughts sink somewhere in the gravel next to the crunching of the soles of his shoes.

He misses this sometimes - just the three of them, without obligation, enjoying the view. The drive across the country had been more fraught with anxiety and loneliness than he's ever really been, and in some ways that's a shame and in others a clear line in the sand that makes him feel safer where he is now. The shadows of his trial and time in prison can't crest the peaks. The crags and high valleys of the west separate this life from the last, and only a little of that desolation followed him past the mountain ridges. It drives an ugly black SUV, and holds him like the intention is to absorb him through the skin to its ribs to the dark center of its existence.

(*"I am half-sick of shadows," says you to the corners of your room, book in hand and tasting the words in the days of summer, when you have nothing but reading to do.*)

Will's considered it in the middle of the night before, privately when he doesn't feel the press of Hannibal's presence on his mind or hands on the small of his back, if it wouldn't be better to still be alone. He could do it again, he supposes. Just load up the car, and take the best things with him. He never really accumulated more than a suggestion of a personal life here, and nothing about the house really calls to him other than it's sturdy, broken in places, and avidly worked over with Hannibal's keen eye, like changing the house changes Will.

Winston and Buster don't know any better - they don't understand broken social connections or unraveling the tightly woven strands of thread spooled thoughts that knot against each other until he becomes the person best suited for where he lives. Fortunately, there's some

things that don't change, even with distance, and that means Will can still be what he is at his core. Shrewd, humble to a fault, a poor man's child that's better with machines than people.

(*But other things don't change too. The miles between you and Hannibal are a nuisance to him, something he can battle back over and over again, and pray that you come to understand there is nowhere that you can hide that he won't slither into and bask in the warmth of you. You don't know if it even makes him happy to need to, only that he does. It's this feeling, like you can hold him there and be revered, that keeps starting over without him from ever becoming a serious consideration.*)

From across the bay, the horizon is darker than the current passing rainclouds, promising no sunset of note today. There's more bad weather rolling in from the northwest - he'll have to make certain that he shuts the windows and turns on the heater tonight. He'd hate after all that work he did to the floors to have them spotted because he can't keep track of the little things.

He walks the dogs back across the neighborhood, and works on sprucing himself up a bit before going down towards the pier lofts when they return to the house and the mud has been wiped away from everyone's feet. There's a curious energy in the empty space, and Will supposes earlier in the day that Hannibal had been by the house but not stayed more than a few moments. There's a restlessness behind the sense of absence. Hannibal has a habit of rearranging things throughout the day that WIll leaves out, like it's a matter of ordering his life and not the same neuroticism that makes Hannibal align his pencils to sit parallel with his desk planner. (*Or sort your mail by type and size, no matter which coast you find yourself on.*) But no such little projects and improvements exist this evening.

He has no new text messages - he assumes he's still to come over for whatever it is you take six hours to make a stock for, where Hannibal will pretend he's not frustrated, and Will in his own way will do the same.

Hannibal is in the kitchen of the loft, leaned against the center island with a glass of red wine forgotten to his left. He's stood upright and broad, not a slouch in his stance to be seen, ignoring the sound of the front door. He looks like an empty house himself, until he turns his head and breaks his preternatural stillness.

Will toes off his boots, carefully placed where all shoes go, his busted steel-toed ones next to Hannibal's polished one. He likes the look of them together.

"Where were you just now?" asks Will, more softly than he intends. He feels like he's interrupted.

"In the home of my aunt and uncle," Hannibal says, tone light, but mostly pleasant, like waking gently from a nice nap. "In the storeroom, before my aunt's family armor. It has a warm burnished gleam in the low lights. I haven't shown it to you yet, have I? It's in my bedroom, back in Baltimore."

"No," Will says with a frown, thinking of the living room, the dining area, the kitchen - places meant for entertaining and hosting, but never the back of the house. "I'll be sure to ask Alana to describe it in an email for me. I'm sure she's seen it by now."

Hannibal smiles, pushing his wine glass along the countertop between his fingers. "Dear heart, I thought you were beyond jealousy for such a thing," he says with a sly tilt of the head. (*You, hearing 'heart', feel yours skip.*) "Although I suppose once there was something to be jealous of when speaking of the armor itself."

"Well if you're going to spend time dwelling on it…"

"I dwell on a great many things in the halls of my mind. You are painted on a great many of its walls."

Will blushes, turns away from Hannibal's gaze. "Speaking of dwelling, you seem to be in a particularly good mood. I thought for sure I'd come back to find you sulking about last night still."

Hannibal's smile is the inscrutable one, the one that Will knows is a truth and a lie. "And here you are, the first to bring it up. Not to worry, Will - I have had better things to think on since then. Let us think on other things now as well."

He reaches for his apron, and sets Will to work on washing spinach while he pulls bite-sized rounds of dough from a container near the stove to drop them into his stock pot, full of warm and creamy yellow broth. Chicken and dumplings, sans the dumplings judging by the bright shock of carrots and squash peeking between turned spoonfuls of the stew base. Will doesn't worry about dinner. No offal, no obscure ingredients with half a dozen accompaniments; just a basic, familiar food.

From the corner, Hannibal pulls a corked bottle of red zinfandel out to pour Will his own glass, which Will takes with some relief. "Pastry boulettes in a cream broth tonight, and a little of the sourdough. Sometimes it's best to keep it uncomplicated on cold nights like this."

On his third glass of wine, Will is unfathomably tired.

Hannibal sits with him on the couch, has slowly pulled him closer until Will is almost fully leaning on him, where oppositely a check pattern blanket nestled on Will's empty side sits. Will wishes he could discreetly curl up under it and rest for a moment. He can't think of a match to the sensation now in his life - maybe camping as a kid, soaking in the warmth of his father against the foreground of a fire and the backdrop of a black night. He's comfortable with Hannibal but uncomfortable with the titles that come with that easy comfort. It makes Will question the edges of his understanding of what the two of them are, between half-closed eyes.

But he really is exhausted, and Hannibal is a sun-baked rock to drowse against, with long fingers that trace the veins of his wrist, even as he looks out over the dark water of the bay and watches the legs of his wine slide down the bowl of his wide glass.

"You've started calling me heart a lot lately," Will mutters.

"Is twice so often?" Hannibal asks quietly, amused.

"Often enough for you to have started to keep track, it seems," Will replies, vaguely regretful to be stirring up something maybe best left unsaid, but unable to stop with the easy candor of

drinking and exhaustion. “It’s just not something I’m familiar with. Maybe it stands out because I haven’t experienced it before.”

“Does it bother you?” Hannibal probes with questing hands, one around the back of his waist, the other coming up to consider the curled ends of hair that have come to fall onto Hannibal’s shirt.

(*Think about it - think about how appraised you feel, like a large faceted and carved stone or an old knife held up by an archaeologist’s hand, the type of person that sees a dusty and old forgotten thing and sees intent and craft, not that you’re just no longer needed by a functional society. “Mon coeur,” he says with a sigh, and thinks of all the heads he can bring you down on. You, heavy, only wish someone held you again.*)

“No,” he says, eyes more fixated on the herringbone pattern of Hannibal’s black shirt than anything in particular. “It doesn’t bother me, I’m just not exactly a poster child for stable human relationships, where pet names get thrown around casually.”

Hannibal’s hand at his waist grasps a little hard, enough to pinch. “I am nothing if not a serious man.”

Will snorts a little, cracking an eye to try and see if he can catch Hannibal looking. “You see, that’s just one of the portfolio of reasons why you’re not exactly a poster child for normal human relationships either.”

Hannibal gives a little huff of a laugh himself, and brings his hand down to brush his fingers again over the valleys of Will’s palm, and up the tendons into the forearm. Will is thankful there are no tremors today to aggravate him again - he prefers this lighter shade of the usually unknowable Doctor Lecter. When he looks up, Hannibal has his honest smile this time, the one that catches his lip with an eye tooth. “We’re identically different, you and I, and in that I’d hate for anyone to ascribe the word ‘normal’ to either of us. But even then, you’re still different than me,” Hannibal pauses to think, absently bringing his hand back up to Will’s hair. A man driven by textures, Will thinks, always looking for something to examine. “I can’t think of someone more fully realized while also still full of potential than you.”

Will shuffles a bit. “That sounds like a very delicate way to say that I could work on a few things.”

Hannibal gives a hum, but doesn't give him much more than that, combing his fingers through the hair on his shoulder. It feels good, so Will must do his best to keep that to himself. (*You'd hate to let him know directly, though you're certain he does anyway - you'd hate to give him another good hand to play in your constant repartee of irritations and strange affections. You wish you knew how to parry it, and make him feel the same wordless ease.*)

"I can think of one thing in particular," he says after a pause, fingers temporarily caught in a snag that he has to work out, "but all in good time." He turns to breathe into Will's hair, nose running from the crown of his head to his brow. "Not this time in particular I think," he adds, ponderous, sad.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asks Will, feeling his eyelids droop, sinking into the couch, doing his damndest to not laugh at how Hannibal has flipped the pillows over so the words on them are hidden, or how the suffused glow of the street lights in the sea mist feel like hiding from the center of a cloud. He wants to focus and glaze this moment, keep it from cracking with age, but he just can't seem to stay awake long enough, and it's slipping through his hands. He has enough presence of mind to clutch at Hannibal's other hand for a moment, relaxed on his waist. He gives it a squeeze, and tries to let his appreciation sink from the thin bones and scarred skin of his hand down to the other beneath.

"Good night, Will," Hannibal says, and Will wishes he looked at his face. "I'll see to the dogs before I turn in."

The same refrain, and also permission. It sounds like a promise - it's nice to be taken care of, to be able to shake off some duties from the day and just exist. He's so heavy. Will doesn't even remember when his eyes drift shut and stay shut, just the feeling of long fingers working snarls from his hair, threading the disparate pieces together until it's smooth as coiled wires.

Will wakes up groggy and cotton-mouthed. This part isn't unusual. He's a borderline functioning alcoholic, border still favoring functional, but occasionally he's inclined to

overdo it, and that means he's well acquainted with sour stomachs and the dizzy march of drunkards up and down the stairs of the house.

The part that is unusual is the grogginess doesn't fade, even after he stares at the high white ceilings of the loft, a dull grey in the glow of the pier lights outside. There's a floating feeling in his limbs, like he's not actually there, just visiting.

"Hannibal?" he whispers, feeling adrift. The bed is empty.

He's in the back bedroom of Hannibal's flat, a place he's never really investigated in detail, only seen in the scope of Hannibal's desire for him to be there, and shortly after his own desire to escape it. Will wants Hannibal to respect his own bedroom at the white house, so he's returned the favor by leaving Hannibal his own bolt holes and hiding places like the burrowing, predaceous animals that they are. (*But that's not the whole story is it, Will? If Hannibal chooses to linger after sex in your house, soft and affectionate, that's his prerogative and you suppose your net gain. But you? There's nothing more revealing than the hurtful desire to sink into the bed and be enshrined, and that chases you out like a devil.*). Will finds that his socks are removed and nothing but his undershirt and underwear remain of his clothes. An extra fleece blanket and the comforter are drawn up over him, where a chill has come to roost in his body. He has no idea how he could have slept through all of this, but he supposes Hannibal has more experience moving insensate bodies around that he'd really like to admit to.

The analog clock next to the bed ticks away. Big hand up, little hand to its side - it's 2 am, and the mist is thick in the windows, where condensation gathers at the corners. He rubs his face and sighs, trying to stretch the tiredness from his limbs.

He pauses, frozen. It's 2 am?

Will clumsily stands, shaking out a tremor in his arm even as he is rushing and stumbling out the door into the hallway and to the kitchen, unaccountably afraid of being alone. No lights anywhere, just the glow of the stove vent's nightlight, yellow and static in the quiet. "Hannibal?" he whispers louder, harsh.

The answering stillness is enough. It is deliberate. He rushes back to the bedroom to find his missing clothing, and back into the hall to throw on his raincoat. His boots aren't by the door

- no shoes at all, not the leather brogues, fancy monkstraps, or boating shoes alike. Will swears, scanning the floors.

Hannibal has put Will's boots in a strange place - directly centered on and facing the living room wall. If he puts his feet inside as they stand, he will stare at what he knows is the Columbia's eastward flow, which has surged and been made violent by the storm from the north. It pushes water and sediment and tons upon tons of flowing mass from inland. It tears away at the earth and the mountains until someday they are nothing.

There's the collections of small towns and homes that line this southern bank, hidden farms and duck paddies, and deer trails in the islands of the river. If he draws his memory up, he knows there's the winding of the highway, where he's stopped to admire the view of Astoria, or considered his blackened stag running in the furrows by the highway. If he goes further up, he finds Clatskanie, where Lawrence and his girl Sadie are no doubt asleep, and further than that a series of hollow but occupied towns and cities that he runs away from. But he need not go so far as any of that, because Will knows with the certainty of a drawn hammer in a gun, that in the hills of Navy Heights on the edges of Astoria lives Edmund Ferris, who has never been shy about telling anyone that his family has been there since just after World War 2, and that he'll be there long after that.

(*Hannibal has left you. You know why he left you because he has shown you.*)

Hannibal did say it would be as it never was, but Will never really clarifies what he means because he doesn't want to bring it up again. Out of sight, out of mind. Shall it be as if the event has never happened, that the series of transgressions is forgotten? Or is it that it will be as if Edmund Ferris never happened, another cold case in what is no doubt a long series of cold cases that Hannibal Lecter has enacted on the earth, from continent to continent, tearing away at that which he does not value? Hannibal is a consummate carnivore, and while he would like it to be so, not every meal can be a display. Sometimes a creature eats because it must eat, knowing what it hunts best.

So Will supposes he's only kind of a liar.

Downtown Astoria is cold and misty, and no one is out as he slips from empty space to space to go back home. He avoids shop fronts but doesn't slow himself - the surveillance in town has always been lackadaisical at best, but he took notes when handling the disappearance of Freddie Lounds as a good student does at a lecture - diligently, with a future test in mind. His cottage is a beacon of low greys and whites in the street lights, with the living room lights casting their yellow glow. He off-handedly hopes that Hannibal will be here. He did promise to take care of the dogs, and Will is confident that will have been true. He needs his car keys, damn it, or some kind of indication as to *what's next* .

With shaking hands, he opens the door, greeted by a nervous Winston who must hear him jog down the front path, still cracked and unrepaired despite the extra concrete mix he's kept stashed away. Buster doesn't move from the sofa, where someone has left the throw blanket for him to lay on, covering parts of him as a child tucked in for bed, or as Will is left to sleep off his drugged wine in his underwear. Will shakes his head - Hannibal likes to play favorites.

When Will goes downstairs into the basement, there's things missing, mostly chemicals, but Will is all too familiar with the smell of bleach and the absence of his fishing wire clippers and a particular spool of line that he hasn't had much use for. They seem pedestrian when considering Hannibal, who no doubt travels with a full kit of surgeon's tools, but Will has realized that Hannibal doesn't consider himself too good for anything useful.

(*It's one of the ways you like him best - Hannibal isn't a snob about options. He's just more inclined to take the nicer finish if it's available. Opportunistic materials combined with deliberate ones make him hard to catch - after all, half the methods of creation were already at the scene of the crime. You admired it long before you knew who the Ripper was, a plein air sketch of someone else's tragedy. You admire it now too* .)

All the way upstairs, there's a scattering of books from his bedroom floor that have been moved, one left open, not far from where his phone charger sits idle on the hardwood. It's the charts for the Columbia sand banks heading back towards Knappa and Clatskanie, the very charts that Hannibal has professed many times to not having an interest in. Will reads this one often, has watched Hannibal open it from time to time as a curiosity. So he supposes that was only a half-truth as well.

In the early black hours of the morning, Will sees Karlson Island, large and overgrown, sitting as a field of green amidst the topography. Will hasn't been personally, only heard of it - there's no roads as part of an estuary, but if he's stolen a boat (*and for the love of God, please let it not be yours*), Hannibal could navigate to it without too much trouble in the

higher storm waters. It's a good place for a hunter to disappear, Will thinks. He thinks a few already have. There's other islands as well, sandwiched on either side of it, but in Will's ballpoint pen that he keeps next to him books, a cheap thing with ***Frank's Repair - Boats, Engines, and Parts*** printed in black on red, a *dal segno* is idly drawn next to the island name, calling him to repeat a passage.

It could be nothing - Will has thrifted this chart just as much as anything else in his house, a unwieldy thing that some well-meaning older child of a passed relative or an irritable housewife has donated to empty space on the shelves, but it's so specific, so lazy and confident even in the shitty light of the bedroom that he doesn't think to question it for more than half a second. (*You know a composer, and he is very proud.*)

Grabbing his keys for the boat and swallowing down the anxious beating of his heart in his throat, Will heads down into the harbor, quiet as he can. The docks aren't regularly manned after hours, just an occasional security guard split between three different moorings. Will knows this because he's had one too many awkward conversations with the guy when he was living on Daisy - Sam's his name. He's in his late 50s. He likes the stray grey cat that is in the west mooring.

The devious part of Will is whispering, *wait, wait, make sure he's at one of the other two docks* , before boarding the Tollycraft, and slinking off into the night. Every switch and start of the engine is heinously loud in the mist. A couple of seals bark from beneath the piers when they startle at the sound of him pulling out into the open water, and nothing but cold air greets him when he clears the buoy. It is now 2:46 am, he's in Astoria, Oregon, and Will Graham needs to stop Hannibal from destroying his small life on the edge of the Columbia River.

(*You should call the police. You should call Jack. You could catch him at the very thing you most dread, just close the door on a cage that he wandered into.*)

He's more upset to realize he feels left out.

(*Let's be honest - you never seriously considered if you'd arrest him before, and you won't now.*)

Karlson Island is a fair ride from Astoria, even with the motor on the boat going as fast as he comfortably can in the dark and the poor foggy visibility. The tide of the river is against him, and a higher tide of sea water makes it more obnoxious still to navigate the shallows nearest to the highway without his floodlights. (*You don't dare turn them on - you're as obviously up to no good as a person can be.)* The onboard computer gives him as good of a warning as it can for the sandbars and tide islands below and around him, but the going is slow as he tries to beat the sun that will throw the sky into dark blues and greys.

How ironic would it be if he accidentally got himself killed on the way, when Hannibal had so diligently fed him, drugged him, and put him to bed? There's a certain tenderness to the way he's put up for the night, like Hannibal is doing him a kindness by enacting his vengeance in the middle of the night because he can't bear Will's ire or illness over it, while also leaving all the necessary clues for Will to know later. It's just enough to be obvious to Will, but not enough to even touch on culpability to an authority.

What would Will even say? "See this kind of common but totally obscure to the average layman musical symbol he wrote on my second-hand map? Clap him in irons!" "The rohypnol has probably already cleared my system hours ago, but I had three huge glasses of fancy wine and I was definitely sedated!" "My clothing had been moved with purpose and latent symbolism!"

It's hilarious. Will would arrest himself if he was the officer taking the report from him. He'd know - he's arrested people before for similar things. It would be commendable if it weren't that Will is paralyzed with the fear this will come back down on him, not just Hannibal.

Will is very near soaked and frozen from the water spray when he finally passes Russian Island, and Karlson begins to form in the blue-dark of the pre dawn, just the suggestion of reeds in his low lit path, grasses, and stands of short spruces and white birch trees edging the water flowing in dikes and streams throughout. There's no obvious place to dock on the riverbank, logs felled and rotting in the water. He eventually is forced to anchor Daisy just shy of the land and the hidden bars of sand that he hopes he'll not have to address before long, taking the keys from the boat with shaking hands and pocketing them with a tired groan, knowing what comes next.

He pulls one leg after the other over the side of the hull, and drops himself into the rippling coldness of the water. It's icy and brackish this close to shore, muddy and loose beneath his boots, and it seeps into his socks until he's aware of every fiber and hair against the tops of

his feet. He thinks of the metatarsals growing like roots, how he could be a tree here too, listening to the marsh birds and sinking into peat. That could be peaceful.

He contemplates what he has on him. (*What do you grab in these kinds of circumstances, other than the edges of sturdy ground and try to pull yourself back onto it?*) A fisherman's knife, taken hastily from the cabin of the boat, clean but not particularly sharp right now. A flashlight, because Will is not as blind as the old glasses frames implied, but he's also not a crepuscular animal, even if he does feel a kinship to raccoons and their trashy habits. He leaves his wallet and phone at home, because really, is Hannibal going to text him his location in Google Maps like some kind of an old school gangster on his first run-in with technology and committing crimes? The wallet is obvious; if he's stupid enough to get killed, it's not like it matters to him at that point if they can identify his body. If he's stupid enough to drop it and Ferris is already dead, well then, Hannibal can traipse out of Astoria like he won the lottery.

(*You know he wouldn't - you know he would amend your error somehow, because the man that tucks you in to be safe and accounted for doesn't leave you behind to get arrested for discreet river island murders. You have different appetites - that particular dish is his.*)

His hands are gloved - his fingers would have fallen clear off in the night air without them - but he wonders if he should have covered his face, or worn a cap. He wasn't so distinct the first time he did this. The part of him that buries Freddie Lounds under his *own* house tells him not to worry.

It's not a big island relative to some of the others nearby, though certainly big enough to not be so easy as to throw a stone and know he's going to hit Hannibal's back to grab his attention, like this is some kind of school yard fight and summer vacation is at risk. The going is slow in the tall grasses and trailless wet grounds, and Will tries not to let the luminous glow of night creatures' eyes bother him. These are the last of their hours that he is crashing through, a disturbance to their small existence. The island is for them, and he's just an intruder.

The stumbling around becomes depressing, even as he feels the hot burn of another headache coming on as his stress mounts. How long had Hannibal even been gone? Was he going for practical efficiency? Would he drag it out, and Will, like some action novel hero, can run into a clearing just in the nick of time and tell him he resents the events of the evening and spare the poor bastard, even knowing that Ferris will never keep this shit to himself if he recognizes Will, and Will had better find another septic tank to fill? What can he do with

Hannibal, who is absolutely famished for this kind of validation, but proud and strong enough to ensure Will can't really stop him if he's resolved to it?

It's indisputable that Hannibal has been murdering people in far more obvious places for years undetected, a craft honed over the years that Will doesn't pretend to fathom. His own experiences are limited and desperate. He could turn around back into the boat, return to the dock, let the dogs out real quick, lock up, and be back in the loft like none of this is happening. He can crawl under the covers, yawn like it's any other weekend morning after the sun comes up or to the appointed time he was expected to stay unconscious, and Hannibal will already be back, giddy with the satisfaction of a job well done, and Will looking none the wiser until he's ready to have this conversation again at some unspecified future date.

They could make a lifetime of pretending Will doesn't know, and how hatefully appealing is that thought.

(*Try, try again, you said.*)

There's burrs, and mud, and the angry rustling of shore birds in the sand and reeds as Will shuffles in the dark. Will wanders, panting, wanting to be part of this, wanting to be anything but.

It feels like it takes an eternity, but Will eventually is vindicated by the distant sound of Hannibal's completely unbothered drawl, and Edmund Ferris yelling with all the bluster and impotent rage that Will hasn't heard in earnest, but can feel behind each pointed, hateful statement he's heard over the last nine months living in Astoria. So Hannibal has opted for drawn out - he has been forced to suffer Ferris' obnoxiousness more than his usual want, and will return the favor. Will can respect that design, even if he disagrees with the practicalities of it.

He can just barely hear the suggestion of Hannibal and Ferris' actual conversation ahead in the thickness of the brush, and as he walks down a furrow between twisting aisles of birch trees, catching a glance at wild crabapple trees in the mists, heavy with rotten fruit in the latest months of the year. They shouldn't grow this close to the water's edge, but Will is a bug guy; he doesn't pretend to know about arboreal patterns and distribution, and their

unflagging persistence is admirable. Vaguely from behind the haze of his headache, he makes a note to look it up. Seems important. Seems useful. He'd say he knows someone that already knows about it and could explain it, but they seem a little tied up and unhappy at the moment in Hannibal's company.

Listening, Will understands why.

Hannibal is always talking - it's a wonder that no one ever catches him at his game seeing as he never shuts up. He's so unsubtle that his camouflage is his striking memorability. Will considers if he'll kill him before the man gets the chance to explain. He's still sour mouthed from whatever he's been drugged with, and god, if he didn't need him like he needs the image of water, like the vastness of unpopulated spaces, like the realization that at least part of the root of Will's ugliness is Will himself, Hannibal Lecter would be dead a hundred times over.

(*You had a chance almost a year ago. You didn't take it. You're getting a do-over now, and how lucky for you!*)

Will pauses, despite his shambling drift towards the sounds of the two men beyond. He looks to the left, to one of the wild crab apples, fruit blackened on the branches. His head is pulsing with pain.

In the blue light of the early dawn, his stag stands at the end of the long space between, antlers intermingled in the branches above him. He is grazing on the thin, wispy grass rising up from the moss and sheltered by the branches. The fruit on the ground is splitting under the pressure of the hooves, but he is silent, all billows of breath in the fog. He liked it better nuzzling the side of his arm from the bathtub. He liked it better guiding him home by bus, or lounging under the deck of the house as he rests at night. But he finds he likes it even now anyway.

Will's attention is brought back to Hannibal and Ferris when he hears Ferris swear and fall. When he clears another copse of trees and bramble beneath it, hiding the bulk of himself behind a couple of young spruce trees, Hannibal is as calm and collected as ever, standing over a decidedly bloody Ferris, who has clearly had a terrible night. His nose is distinctly crooked, jaw distended by swelling and blood from what Will suspects is having been kicked in the head. His arms have been bound with what Will recognizes as nylon fishing line, caught over the arms of his khaki shirt.

Hannibal, by contrast, is having a wonderful time in this moment, all arrogance and certainty. He's all in black again, the nitrile gloves the only thing standing out in the early morning light amidst the strange ripping texture of his clothes.

"Now, now, Mr. Ferris, we wouldn't want to disturb the terrain," Hannibal says like he's explaining how best to flip an egg in a skillet, not telling prey to not struggle, like that's natural, that they should *know better*. "Terrible conservational conduct, tearing up nesting habitats, or so I would presume. Aren't you a man cut from nature's cloth?"

Will can't see it, but he knows Hannibal is smiling, the featureless one that speaks to an easy contentment with violence. Ferris, however, is growing more irate the more that the man plays with his perception of the situation. Will sees that Ferris has loosened one arm from his bindings - the fishing line is bound to his sleeve, not his actual arm, and if he can just slip the constraint of the shirt, his hand is going to be free.

He might not need to save Edmund Ferris. Will doesn't know if he wants to. (*Even prey animals have defenses, you think. Hannibal should mind the tusks and horns of boars and sheep* .)

Will watches, but doesn't warn Hannibal, leaning heavier on the trees he hides behind. The needles of their branches itch at his skin.

Predictably, Hannibal comes in closer for another taunt, solid as a rock, confident in his assured victory. A proud hunter of hunters, a man from a time much older than Ferris'. He seems to be taking an unusual amount of delight in seeing his prey stumble around on the shallow pools and furrows in the space between stands of trees. Will thinks he wants to remove all of Ferris' perception of his understanding of the area - "don't know it front from back after all, do you Edmund?"

"You're fucking crazy," Ferris rages from the ground. "I know everyone around here, and you're the most obvious person in the whole shithole of a town. You think I can just fuck off into the river and no one's going to look into you and your hipster trash boyfriend?"

Hannibal is unfazed, stepping close. "There's that hometown pride," Hannibal laughs. "I think you'll be surprised most of us can just disappear at any time without so much as a

ripple," he says with a jaunty pass of his foot over Ferris, leaning down to look him in the face. "You certainly like to think you could without problems. Off the grid, I think you said earlier. I have some limited experience with that as well."

Ferris spits, catching the side of his own ruinous face with saliva. "I'm gonna bring this shit down on you ten times what you can do. You don't got the balls for it."

Hannibal is amused. Will is too, in a distant way. If that's Hannibal's amusement or his own, he doesn't really trouble himself over it. "You are a poor judge of character, Mr. Ferris, though I admire your determination in the face of inevitability. I think we can both agree you've severely misjudged my displeasure with you."

Hannibal, however, has misjudged the tensile strength and grip of the fishing line he has stolen (*borrowed - you would have lent it to him if he asked*), something that Will intimately knows. There's an appropriate line for every kind of fish, and Edmund Ferris is a big, unruly one. Watching Hannibal's arrogance get the better of him is like watching a fuse light.

The filament rolls to the wrist of one arm, Ferris' arm tearing and ripping through the sleeve until it comes up in a freckled and white furor from the collar of his shirt. Will can't see, but he can imagine and feel the zebra stripe bruising of the wire from wrist to elbow. How raucously red and purple his arms will be, how obviously not of natural causes.

(*An abstract: The accurate interpretation of bruising at necropsy is essential to understanding how a victim has been injured and assists the pathologist in a reliable reconstruction of the events leading to death.*)

Ferris rolls, arm loose and grabbing for a small jackknife in a discreet pocket of his own boots - it's the kind of thing Will thinks he'd do if he were a ranger. Never know when you need to cut line and try again. The man crows with satisfaction when he takes his swing with it after feinting with a kick to Hannibal's leg, catching him at the ankle when Hannibal tries to avoid the kick. The knife slices the laces of Hannibal's boot. In turn, Hannibal startles at the bulk of Ferris coming right after in retaliation. Will still only watches as they both hit the ground, Ferris using his muscled shoulder to slam Hannibal's shoulder before he can rally and grab his own switchblade from his belt, neatly sheathed, only waiting for permission to be used.

The headache casts it in a different light. He doesn't remember much about the night he brings Abel Gideon to Hannibal's house, only the garbled underwater feeling of it, but this strikes him as similar. This time he's in the backseat looking at it from the rearview mirror. It's rather like watching from the other side of a fishbowl - Hannibal, normally refined and drawn in like he intends to appear smaller to not frighten other animals afield, rabid and straining and grimacing against the mass of this angered bull of a man. And Ferris, just a man like any other in the woods, locked in a fight he didn't realize he started weeks ago. The only thing that separates him from Will is tone and education, and the only thing that separates Hannibal from him in shame versus acceptance, and Will doesn't quite know how to reconcile that.

He looks back behind him, where he knows Daisy is, bobbing in the water as an escape - the stag is watching him. It belongs here, chewing rotten fruit, heaving great gulps of the winter air out in front of it. It's an incomplete scene without it, like the empty bed, the half built house, the piles of books with no furniture, a long drive in the cold of the midwest, watching for the scrape of its antlers and casting velvet from them like a bloodied shadow.

(*You're happy it's back in the same way you've been reluctantly happy that Hannibal is here. It's a terrible thing, but it's yours.*)

He knew what he would do the minute he woke up alone.

Will sighs, clenches at the branches, and moves. He runs from the tree, moving around in the dark to avoid stones and sea grass, and little furrows that make Will think on gravity and the inevitability of impact.

It's enough with the running start to transform the scene - in the twilight he brings his hands down on Ferris who has managed to wrestle Hannibal underneath him - knocks him hard enough on the side of the head that Will's hand hurts like he's broken it. He pictures the muscle and sinew warping under the path of his palm, crunching up against the vertebrae of the neck. Wonders if he could hit hard enough to disrupt an artery in the neck without drawing a blade. It's so easy to kill people with simple trauma. Everyone's one good blood clot away from oblivion.

Ferris roars, and swinging to his side, hits Will beneath his arm to the sharpness of his ribs even as he limply goes rolling away. Will doesn't make a sound other than an aborted guttural groan, and raises his knee up to catch the other man in the face. The explosion of blood from

Ferris' nose is kaleidoscopic, and Will is trapped in the memory of summer docks for a fraction of a moment, watching his father's chest heave with effort. It buys him enough time to consider what the order of operations is next.

(*You know this one, you were a good student; begin with the complex math.*)

Will turns back to face the ground in front of him.

Hannibal is temporarily dazed in a dark heap of clothes meticulously covered by clear plastic, just as debonair and handsome entangled in the sea grass and moss as he is in an office or the familiar comforts of Will's house. Just as quickly he is grinning around a bloody smile, the most honest emotion Will has seen in him. Every tenderness, every affluent, smooth turn of the head, clever quips, and meticulously tended suits, rendered to nothing in the broad stretch of his mouth, breathing pain and savagery from the top of a bespoke sterile suit. What a remarkable monster he is. How much Will's heart hurts at the sight of him.

Ferris is stunned, laying on the ground and panting as he watches where Will stands over Hannibal, who has opted to just look up at Will in his manic joy instead of doing something more useful. The amber of his gaze is as hard and inescapable as ever, but wrapped into a victoriousness that Will is infuriated by.

(*Hannibal, standing outside your cell, just as collected as can be. You, finally able to see what wore your trust like a cheap scarf, doing everything in your power to keep your face blank. "Hello Will," he said, as you choked down the unfairness. "Hello Doctor Lecter," you said, and he had the temerity to have the same smile as now.*)

Will kneels into him, slow.

"Will," sighs Hannibal, and cannot continue for the strange awe growing there.

Will bites his cheek until he tastes metal, and as quick as he can, he thrashes Hannibal's face with the side of his hurt hand so hard he can feel his finger jolt out of place.

It feels so good, so wonderful to clear that *stupid, conceited, piercing* glance off his face in the brightness of blood, the meat of his palm catching Hannibal's shocked *oh* of a mouth. Twice, thrice he hits him, four times he hits him, his own eyes relaxed and tired. His other fist is nested in a twist of plastic and cable-knit and all he wants to do is ravage him as beasts do each other.

He thinks Hannibal turns into it. It feels less like punishment and more like worship when he does, and that burns Will as sure as a fire. Even when Will comes to a stop, breathing shakily and running a thumb over the split in Hannibal's lip like he'll paint his face in it, he can't quite unclasp the other hand from near Hannibal's neck, which Hannibal brings his own gloved hand up to in order to run a thumb up and down the tendons of Will's wrists, as sweet here as in their secretive dens in town. Will shudders at it, and pulls the forgotten knife from Hannibal's belt.

He could kill Hannibal right now, and be done with it. It's not that he hasn't had the motivation or the means up to this point, god no, he could lick that wound a thousand times over and find that *joie de vivre* for a moment's time .

He thinks he'd miss Hannibal like an eye, all of Will's dark perception focused and clean when in his company. He'll miss him like his own arm, grappling with him in a heated embrace, being made to feel hallowed and fragile in a way that feels less like belittlement and more like worship. He can still smell the fabric softener and bleach in the thrifted blankets - sees the distant lights of the Columbia Bridge from the living room view while Hannibal settles in protecting his shoulder and doesn't sleep because then it will be over too quickly. Hannibal is inside of him and even now outside the safe places Will has carved for himself in Astoria - he has to be with him always now. He's hollow without him, and *that* is infuriating. The two bedroom junk house like his would feel like a cavern without the man. Perpetually in absentia, the cognac on the porch, and a dog at either of their sides, and pulling each others' hair in their rush to be under each others' skin.

Hannibal can turn from tender to hurtful to tender again in the blink of an eye. He'll never stop that. He'll always be dangerous to Will. Will doesn't know where someone goes at the end of the western world to escape that kind of manifest destruction that so wholly is his.

And the truth of that?

It's lovely.

He pulls Hannibal's knife from its leather sheath. It's an attractive thing, ebony handled and polished to surgical brilliance. Stylistically, not Hannibal's personal taste, but something appropriate to skin an animal. (*It's the kind of thing you deglove a rabbit or a fox with, and with a strong pull let the weak connective tissue do the rest. Nature is frightening in its callous efficiencies.*) It's not too far from what Will would have liked to do given another string of fury, another insult served. He would have come to this at some point.

Not like this today, though, in the charcoal-dark morning. He turns back towards Ferris.

Ferris has been shocked into silence, even as cold cunning wavers back and forth in his eyes, sizing Will up as he approaches. Will offers him a hand up, which Ferris resentfully takes, thinking he's found someone breaking up a bar fight for him like usual - violent men require violent assistance. Will cuts the fishing line on his other arm, hands shaking. From nearby, Hannibal gives a long vacuous breath.

"Shit, Graham, you just watching in the back?" he seethes, spitting blood and mucus and what Will suspects is frustrated tears from his bearded face. "Jesus, fuck," he groans, still clutching a little at Will's hand. There's relief hiding there. He's not man enough to offer it.

Will squints, considering the terrain, considering Hannibal going still and disappointed on the ground, but ever curious. Grateful, in the face of defeat.

Will swallows around his heart in his mouth, and pushes Ferris with sore arms straight backwards to the ground.

Ferris blinks in confusion when he lands.

Beneath his neck, the river-worn darkness of a large rock sits upwards in the dark sediment, still damp from rain and mist and now with the black spill of blood from Ferris' head. It makes a loud ***pop*** , something broken loose. Will knows a good impact when he sees one. It's hardly even a question of the inevitability of it.

Will contemplates Ferris as he shakes on the ground.

He'll be going into shock, hemorrhaging in the spaces between bone and soft tissue. Blood will seep into the cap that is his skull, pressuring his eyes, erasing connectivity as it goes. He'll grind to stillness, no different than a rock coming loose from a hillside, if he leaves him here like this. Old Edmund Ferris, took a nasty fall going fishing in the early morning by himself in a storm.

But that's not what they're here for.

It's certainly not what Will's here for.

Will turns to Hannibal, still on the ground but propped up on his arms, face riveted to him and close mouthed like it would startle the moment for him to breathe.

(*Let Hannibal bear witness, and accept that while you are like him, you are also not, a clash of bright lightning and thunder next to his chthonic, ritualistic tortures. But let it never be said you are not as purposeful, even as you are more terrible and immediate in your need to cause harm.*)

Will raises his leg, watching Ferris look absently up at him, and brings his foot down again and again and again on the thick neck below him, and he only stops when he's certain that the cause of death will be typed in as crush injuries, written in the star-speckled array of the tread of his boots. This is in the open, this is for his first audience, and while he is not proud, he is full of maddening intent and understanding.

He times himself to the burning pulse in his head, water dripping from his face.

Crunch, crunch, ***crunch***, ***CRUNCH***.

act 5 - what has been done will be done again

The first thought he has when he slows to stillness is that the moment should be fraught with some kind of ominous silence. There must be quiet before the disaster begins to unfold in full. The reality is that all that Will hears is loons calling to each other in the twilight of the morning over the fog. There's crickets in the high grass, and a little wind in what few trees stand monstrous and black in the gloom. It's peaceful, like standing in rushing water, or sitting on the porch with a drink.

It's like he's been holding his breath for a month, and only just now let it out. It's surprising - reality doesn't care about death anymore than it cares about how or who it's wrought by. He would have hated that, even just a year ago.

The second thought is that he likes these boots, but short of a brief dip in bleach, which is surely terrible for leather, they're probably forensically unsalvageable, and how obvious are boots that have been absolutely stripped clean when you're a publicly known mess anyway? Will stares down at them, and the glistening wetness of blood that's splattered until it's caught in the side zipper, in the laces, in his goddamn socks probably.

That all feels very inconsequential as he breathes out a long column of humid white air. There's a buzzing thrum behind his eyes and ears. The birds are waking up at the fringes of the marsh. It's morning, and there's so much to do.

Will turns from Ferris, gone still and absent on the ground.

Hannibal has risen from where he had fallen, face dimly aglow with the distant morning light, not quite so bold as to smile and possibly incapable of doing it with how furiously his jaw is swelling. Will takes it into himself to be proud - Ferris may have turned the tables in surprise, but it's Will that actually did the lasting damage.

(*Damage to a lot of things. How many times have you humbled Hannibal? How many times have you taken his attentions, no matter how ugly or beautiful, and shoved them into a dark space to forget, because you can't handle that you like them? Just say no, like any good drug. That's what you're supposed to do. What you* ***should*** *have done.*)

He stares for a moment, feeling out his temper. It's still hot, not glowing from the forge red any longer, but it hisses against the cooling water of the fog and rain. His ribs hurt. His headache stampedes from beneath the shock of the moment and into the day, not to be forgotten or ignored any longer.

"You couldn't just let it go," he hisses, wincing against it. "Some dumb fuck from a corner of the middle of nowhere, with probably all of ten brain cells to rub together, was enough to upset you enough to...drug me and go on a clandestine wintertime manhunt? What are you trying to *prove*?" Will breathes.

To his credit, Hannibal doesn't look cowed. Will doesn't know if he could cow Hannibal if he wanted to. The other man favors Will with a long, considering look. Tasting it.

"I must live by my own code, just as much as you live by yours," rumbles Hannibal, spitting a mouthful of blood to the stones and coming to stand next to Will. "And yours has evolved."

Will wonders at the mottled side of Hannibal's face, and feels satisfaction and dissatisfaction knowing it will continue to bloom with bruises as crocus in the snow does, that he'll have to watch for weeks as it heals. He's managed to leave a cut in his earlier assault, where it bleeds over Hannibal's right eye, and Will is glad for it. If he's going to hurt someone, he wants it to be memorable. He wants the lesson to stick. He wants to strike him again for good measure. He's halfway raised his limbs to do so before he realizes it.

Hannibal grabs Will's arm before it can reach his face, clearly tired of being hit. Understandably - it's been a rough half an hour for him. Nevertheless, his broad hand is careful with him, a pressure cuff for his sore wrist. The nitrile blue of the glove is that of a corpse's.

Hannibal pulls in air between his bloodied teeth, and laughs to himself, sucking on his lip. "How quickly you rush to attack when your leash is loosened," he sighs wonderingly, letting Will's hand free.

“You don’t really get to say that, like you didn’t *plan* the whole thing,” mutters Will while running a hand through his knotted hair. “What happened is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t mean for you to be here at all,” Hannibal replies, licking at his mouth. “I merely wished for it, and left the means for you to understand if you desired to. Everything thereafter is the work of your own hands,” he says, arms spread in offering and eyes bright, “and your works are beyond my imagining and expectations.”

Will bites his lip, turning away again.

Hannibal will have none of it, striding to the front of him again. “I understand your hesitation to disrupt what you have crafted here,” he adds, “but let’s be frank - you enjoyed that, Will. You enjoyed that the way you enjoyed Hobbs, and you are angry that you enjoyed that, because there is no badge to hide behind, no long list of victims to brandish.”

“I’m *angry* because I woke up drugged, alone, and absolutely certain you’re fucking up my life again,” Will pushes at Hannibal’s shoulder, walking forward and around him. He flexes his hands, shaking out the tremors, he turns back to look at his boots, at the weird glint of the plastic suit, and finds himself unaccountably furious by it.

“What about the last couple days made you think I was in a hurry to beat the neighbor into a pulp, shitty homophobic white trash or not?” Will yells. “They make up half of the United States. *I* probably get counted with them, and even if not, I can’t possibly be bothered to be upset by *all of them* the way that you do,” says Will, hands shaking. He wants to be stronger, and hides his tremulous hands in his pockets. It’s cold. The twilight is turning brighter from beneath the cover of the clouds.

Hannibal's frustration is palpable. “I have put aside as much of myself as I can to understand you, and in turn for you to understand me,” Hannibal says in measured words, explaining like Will isn’t listening. (*You aren’t, you are, you know yourself better this morning, but struggle to hear it said out loud.*) He pauses, doesn’t look away, licks the inside of his mouth again with a wince. Will feels it like his own pain, and cherishes it. “But I cannot abide rudeness or ugliness without purpose. You hold your father in esteem - did it not sting you to hear him so maligned? It certainly stings me for you to be. I will not tolerate it.”

“Unless it’s you, arranging for it?” Will scoffs. “Yes, it upsets me,” he replies, frustrated in kind. “But most rudeness is senseless. People are insensate with their self-absorption. You weren’t thinking of me when you hauled everyone’s ass out here.”

(*You cannot believe you allowed this. You cannot believe your heart sung with the absoluteness of your hand crashing against Hannibal’s mouth, with the insistence of your boot grinding vertebrae and living tissue into the scattered river stones beneath until there’s just a fleshy smear of a neck.*)

“I think of you *constantly*,” says Hannibal like its a curse, unintentionally honest.

Will gives a weak laugh at the thought of that, tired. He can see some of it - the alibi of being with Hannibal for the night, the safe place to sleep, the mindfulness of a monster thinking *this is a thing I do not wish to hurt, but I must hurt* ***something*** . Not knowing that Will would be devastated to be left. Left out. Part of the illusion, not working behind it.

Hannibal braves another approach, cupping cold gloved hands around Will’s neck and shoulder. “I didn’t think you wished to participate, or were ready to do so. I misjudged. But how beautifully you understood my purpose all the same, dear heart.”

Will scoffs, even with his chest hurting at each small affection. “I don’t know if beating someone to death in a bog over a few cosmically pointless insults is something I understand.”

“But you do,” Hannibal insists. “You just did. I watched you, becoming something awesome in its truest sense, lit from within.”

And he’s not wrong. Ferris doesn’t look like a man as much as felled cattle in the dawning light, his unclothed arm a series of criss-crossed marks against the natural paleness of his skin where the fishing line dug in. He has freckles on his forearms. He’s had stitches just behind the right elbow, and Will wonders at what he did, how many years ago, if it’s something that scarred more than the medial collateral ligament of the humerus. People are made up of small things like that.

Will gives an exasperated sign, feeling his throat tightening around the anger behind his teeth, like his tongue is trapped and swollen. “Why do you always have to do this to me??” he breathes into wisps of mist, hot against the air. “Why can’t we just have what we’ve had for the last month? Isn’t it enough that I want you here? You teach me that you don’t bite, and then you do, with all your teeth, not as hard as you can - but enough to not trust you.”

Hannibal steps closer. He looks so much like he wants to grab and crush Will against him, if only he could drive the conviction he feels into Will, placing a flag as one claims land. “So you bite me first, as you did,” he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, and in some ways it is. “All your dogs bite,” he continues in his aesthete drawl. “Given the right compulsion. Even the most well-trained. It is written in animals all across the kingdom animalia to hunt, to bite, and live.”

Will sighs, and pulls Hannibal into him.

He’s never been the aggressor in their relationship, because aggression is ownership, and Will has hesitated to own this the way that he owns his personal strangeness, his home, his boat, his dogs, his father and all the little terrible things that make him and Will similar. Aggression is the only correct response for Hannibal. His fingers throb with his heartbeat as they press against the vinyl and wool of Hannibal’s back. It’s so alien, being separated by plastic, when he’s grown accustomed to the casual, possessive restraint of the older man. It’s still Hannibal, just one lacquered in a varnished shell. The completed work, all the pieces he didn’t see before falling together.

Hannibal is patient, awaiting more violence. There is no resistance when the plastic squeaks between them, their muddy boots caught against the other’s, Will searing with feverous heat against Hannibal’s hand and tucked under his neck.

Will should hit him again, until he can’t see the shape of him. Will pulls him into a biting kiss instead, and thinks of tearing viscera between them even as his teeth pierce the soft tissue of Hannibal’s split lip.

Hannibal sighs, with the relief of one lifted of their burden, putting the gloved hand on Will’s shoulder instead to his waist. He has such sharp long fingers, seeking to hook the tips of them into the bone of Will’s hips. They could fuse there, steel bone plates drilled into him, and it would hold them together. Will just wants to be carried, he wants to sleep, he wants to not

have to think of how to make this mess into nothing, or how his chest hurts at the idea of any of it ending. The high of imparting his justice has passed - now comes inevitability.

Hannibal pulls back, eyes bright like warm coals, the bruises on the right side of his jaw beginning to speckle and purple with blood. Will's hands hurt looking at them, but satisfaction swells under his tongue knowing they're his, not a proxy. His eyes are straining trying to focus on them, sharp and stinging even in the low light of the early dawn.

"This is all I ever wanted for you - to know me, and to be unashamed of what you're capable of. Here I am before you, in my entirety. And here you are," he marvels, "the shocked man slaying Hobbs in his kitchen is a different man from the one that stands before me, no matter how you came to be, by nature or by design."

And it takes Will a moment, but he sees it - Hannibal is sore, a little annoyed with a plan gone awry, a little excited with the plan that arises despite that. Hannibal is a monster, but one comfortable in his skin, not a trace of embarrassment in him. And Hannibal is so proud of Will. Hannibal is so, so happy.

(*You, fully seen, are too somewhere underneath the shell-shock.*)

Will swallows and steps back.

"You have to take care of this," he says, meeting Hannibal's look, a curious heat filling his face to overpower the pain in his head. Resolve, insistence, the truth of a need to pull their fingers together and be a single organism for a moment. "I said I'd burn down the house with you in it if you lied to me, yet here we are. I want to trust you, I want to live here. So," Will says a pointed look down at the broken man on the ground. "You better damn well take care of it."

Hannibal, looking at the body and again at Will wonderingly, closes his eyes, breathes out, and pulls Will into him again.

"It would take more than a fire to remove me from you," says Hannibal like it's a promise, and Will knows that's true too.

They load the body into the boat, throwing a tarp around and over it in the hidden well of the stern where he would typically keep fish for gutting - Will wants to ensure that he doesn't bleed out onto the cabin carpet or built-ins. There's a couple little places inside the cabin that he could stash him in an emergency, but it's too obvious if he tears any fixtures out to remove the forensic evidence later. Nobody would believe the Will Graham that lives in Astoria gives two shits about his ugly boat carpet after so long treating it like a home. He's not even sure with the two of them how they're going to do this without being noticed.

He should invest in more tarps. He seems to need to replace them with some frequency.

Will is almost mute with an ominous dread that has settled into him when considering how best to proceed, but Hannibal - Hannibal can barely keep from spilling every possibility out of himself, invested in their confederacy even as he feels out his molars with a tongue that can't leave the ache of them alone. He's stopped bleeding from the mouth, but his face is a disaster, and Will has no idea how he'll ever hide it.

(*He won't. Every strike is a kiss, and you rained them down while he counted them.*)

"We could skin and joint him like a deer - seems appropriate, consummate huntsman that he is. It's a shame we have no linen bags to haul him around on our backs like a backcountry sportsman," Hannibal considers the mass on the floor with a curious gleam. Will thinks he is trying to not influence Will's decision on the next steps, but is finding it incredibly difficult. He's had a long time to imagine this first time together, and it's unnatural after his years of experience to take the back seat.

Will agrees with him incidentally, but wants to argue. He's unnerved by their synchronicity in this, and the returning throb in his head is making him nauseous.

"I'm not carrying his head on the top of a pack to show my friends back home over a beer," Will rasps, securing the body and opening the cabin to start the engine.

“Aren’t we as a species supposed to forge interpersonal bonds by sharing relatable stories?”

“The guys at the shop are hardly going to enjoy my breakdown of how best to separate the teeth from the jaw so they can’t get dental records.”

“But I am,” Hannibal says, smiling, all gallows humour even at this ungodly hour. Will looks at him in the dim halogen lamp of the boat cabin, and thinks that he can't think of a worse person to want.

(*But here you are.*)

There’s a sense that they are running low on time. Will’s heartbeat is a thrum in his head like a song that’s gotten stuck, even though his feet have gone still with the rumble of the surf against the hull of the ship. He writes the shaking in his hands off to the roughness of the water. It’s a bit like gliding over icy snow.

He has to admit he doesn’t really know where the last 30 minutes on the water have gone.

They take the trawler down the river towards the mouth of the river, under the cantilever of the Astoria-Megler Bridge into the marine fog. It’s bulk soars over them, quiet at this hour. No one passes over and no one passes by on the water, though he can see the glow of fog lights from the shore where he could pull into his dock, walk to his house, and crawl into bed until someone comes to get him. He can’t see past the ache in his neck and skull, and hiding in the blankets feels like safety.

Will contemplates running them straight into the ocean, to the harsh waves of the open water, famous for a thousand ships sunk. Coast Guard, oil freighters, frigates, day trippers - it’s all the same to the current. Daisy is too light and shallow on the surface to properly catch on the sand bars this far out from the shore, but he could capsize them. It’s a novel thought - how Will could turn the body of his first home away from home away from home until the waves come over the edges of the hull, growing steadily full with the saltwater of the Pacific. They could become sand at the end of the earth, bones ground down to nothing but sediment.

He likes to think the gulls and cormorants, who he has so industriously befriended with the picture of eating flesh, could take his eyes, maybe Hannibal's tongue. They are unholy things he feels have life beyond their deaths. They should be cast into the water and forgotten. It would certainly make figuring out what to do next with a body and a serial killer (*two **separate** , imminent problems!*) on his boat simpler.

Hannibal takes Will's injured hand in his as Will steers the boat with the good one, feeling for fractures and displacement, but deeply distracted by the shaking of it. The constancy of the tremors is even beginning to disturb Will. The glide of the pressure of Hannibal's fingers is painful. If the frown on Hannibal's face is anything to go by, and the swollen heat of where his pinky and ring finger are curled and broken, Will can look forward to many exciting years of arthritis there, a fitting counterpart to his gunshot wound above it.

Despite the pins and needles in his arm, and the burning fury that is the mangled disaster of his right hand, Will is ashamed to be aroused by Hannibal kneeling in front of him, a more familiar sight than he supposed it would ever be. He thinks Hannibal is too, but that he wants to drive his fingertips into the wound until he reaches bone, until he blackens the marrow, and *that's* the attractive part.

"It's going to be rough on the sea," Will mutters, feeling faint. "I need to know what you had in mind for the body drop, because it's sure as shit going to be hard to explain being out past the bar in this weather if someone sees us."

Hannibal nods, still considering Will's hand, and the strong tremors. Stronger than his usual, and too injured to properly sit on and hide it. "Then head inland towards Astoria. I can start making arrangements with proper cell service."

Will shakes his head, fighting off a chill. "So we can... what, roll him down the street? It's bad weather, not a city lockdown, somebody's bound to be out and take note," Will says, shrugging a shoulder, and biting the inside of his mouth. "And it's not like we don't look like a bomb went off near us too."

Hannibal seems unbothered. "Several places to hide him onboard and offboard - his own motorboat is in a shoal on the northside of Karlson Island, so the docks near downtown is

hardly the first place anyone will look, and there's nothing except the ship to indicate we're anywhere but at home still abed. Did you not see the cars still parked?"

This is news to Will - no he didn't see, thank you very much, because he was half stupid with drugs and panic at 2 in the morning, as one does. He knows there's some things that Hannibal has to have thought out already, and Will's participation is more of a surprise collaboration than a complete improvisation. It sours his attitude, throat clicking around a dry swallow.

Will, in personal best form, changes the subject. "I don't know if either of us really has any business in human inhabited areas," he grumbles. "Obviously I can't speak for you, but I thought I had a handle on myself. About 250 pounds of evidence in the back of the boat says that I don't," Will points out, feeling himself getting louder and indignant.

(*Accepting what you are - murderer, hypocrite, traitor, beloved, dear heart - means you know your species, not that you're a good thing.*)

Hannibal sighs, carefully laying Will's hand on his lap, but considering instead of sad. "You are a predator of convenience, Will. Rather like a bear, content with honey and fruit but just as capable of a hunt," and Hannibal goes out of his way to catch Will's face in his hand, turning it until Will can feel his blunt nails scratch at his beard and the skin beneath. It's not a careful grip, but it is sure, and consuming. "Your jaw is made to break bone - it is by design, as God intended, and God laid a ram before you in the wilderness."

"Are the biblical analogies supposed to make me feel better?"

Hannibal smiles, stroking Will's face with his thumb. His cheek is distracting with its map of burst veins and sore spots. "You like to observe, as do I," he says. "We've both had time to watch each other and draw conclusions. I can only speak to what I've seen," he pauses, considering. "And I think you scent blood and follow your nature. What happens after that is no more immoral than seagulls pushing a competitor's clutch of eggs from a cliff, or fire overtaking a meadow in dry conditions."

"Premeditated murder as an act of nature?" Will says with a frown.

Hannibal shrugs. “Certainly an act of man - if the first was brother against brother, imagine how easy each kill following after has been.”

Will stares out the front, listening to rain beat the windows, rocking with the waves. Hannibal’s gaze is earnest, and eventually even Will can’t ignore it. Hannibal strokes his broken hand again with the lightest graze of fingers, bending to kiss a blackened knuckle. He wanders the valleys of split skin with the same reverence he touches his neck after coming, and that's somehow the thing that makes Will's eyes water.

“Cheer up, Will,” he breathes into the aching pulse in Will’s arm. “Being born is one of the most traumatic things that happens to a person. You are experiencing it again, with the trauma of knowledge. Eve in the garden reaching for a second apple, knowing it will hurt this time.”

They float along, listening to Daisy’s engine chug along, struggling the further out they go. On either side of the horizon, the shore bends into the sandy peninsulas of the river’s mouth, where they jut into the grey sea. It’s all Will can do to keep ahold of the ship’s wheel, dizzy and anxious and absolutely burning up with stress and pain, but also an ungodly desire to make Hannibal understand. It’s so essential to say the right thing - Will is tongue-tied with the need for it, to share a moment of clarity.

Will thinks he was supposed to have started over. He crossed the continent to do it, razing his life like a field gone to seed. In some ways, Hannibal is starting over too, forgetting a life carefully planned. They’re still who they’ve always been. Will is a well-meaning recluse of necessity - his default setting is reserve, until it’s not, and whatever’s handy will help him make sure he can restore equilibrium. Hannibal is methodical, charming, and aggravatingly single-minded about living large, no matter the casualties. But let it not be forgotten they both unmistakably have casualties.

Hannibal’s torn up the eastern seaboard with macabre displays. Will has ferreted his own, secret hate away in his own house, somewhere to stand over and drink and pretend he’s not gloating, he’s not pleased. They know each other’s sin. They’ve mutually participated in the luring and execution of a local pariah, but well known pariah. His body is in the back of the boat. Will’s clothes are covered in evidence. He has no idea how they’re going to compromise on what to do next.

He doesn’t want to run away. This is home. He’s hoping it can be Hannibal’s too.

He thinks he opens his mouth to say this, until he's not sure he's opened his mouth at all. There's no sound, just a remarkable widening of Hannibal's eyes. Will thinks it's in some kind of embarrassed shock on Will's behalf, but Hannibal looks honestly disturbed.

Ah, thinks Will, as his vision tilts, that explains it.

He's actually sliding out of his seat, trembling. It's not the boat shaking - it's him.

For a second in time he's caught in the ridiculous urge to apologize, muscles seizing up in his back and neck. He distantly thinks it's good that the pain in his head has gone from flooding to the numb heaviness in his limbs. (*Your fault, sorry for the confusion! Sorry that you were fairly certain Hannibal would use this against you, and you'd be left holding the bag. Sorry that you're about to* really *fuck up this coverup, maybe he can ask next time before going rogue.*)

Hannibal has risen up like a shot to catch him by the shoulder and ease him towards the wretched red shag carpet of the floor, so very careful with his arm. Will wants to wave him off, laugh and say *I've had so much worse. You've done so much worse.*

But there's more.

You can be happy with me here, he wants to say, and of course he can't. *I know what you are and what I am, and we can be happy here if we just get this first time right.* He can't feel his mouth, but... Hannibal will be fine. They'll both be fine.

Hannibal above him turns him onto his side. He's saying something, looking harried and askance at the way Will's body is locking up, but Will just hears static. He is awake and unmoving, until he is not, and doesn't know where or what he is at all.

New Orleans has a watery quality in person and memory. Will often thinks about if that's because of his recollection of the heat, or if he just didn't sleep much in those days, and the weft of his imagination warps like bad film that worsens with each passing year.

The old house on Kerlerec is a familiar relic, if not one that he really has a lot of intimacy with. A few years of late night beats as an officer and tired walking to ease the tension from the night's interviews and gruesome scenes makes it a waystone in the heart of Treme-Lafitte for him, all peeling paint and disrepair.

As a man moved on from New Orleans, Will would be the one that finds a company to maintain it, to make sure no one breaks its old single pane windows, and that the trash finds its way out of the plant beds. His father never gives it much consideration. He hated the people who lived in it, and he hates that it's his now. Beau keeps the property in his name but his home in another state the same way Will keeps his mother's salt and pepper shakers - somewhere he doesn't have to look at them.

It's not really his or Beau's house. He's never been inside of it, even when a brittle looking lawyer brings his father the documentation that his grandparents have entrusted to him. They didn't care to ever really meet Will, everything conducted through passive-aggressive letters to Beau, like they could wash their hands what Will would become if it's Beau's fault, not theirs, or the occasional small gift or phone call to wish him happy birthday, like they remembered he was their grandson, and that there wasn't a path of destruction carved between them by a disappointing daughter, who probably didn't know how to be anything other than what she was.

When he lived in the city, the house made a good place to lean, cigarette in hand, thinking about how it's only an accident of fate and crumbled family relations that he didn't grow up in it. He could be like any other dysfunctional child living in poverty through the 80s. Food scarcity. (*Beau fished - you always ate, even if it's just catfish and buttered noodles.*) Dead-end jobs. (*You're bright, and while your empathy makes you a miserable teenager, already inclined to anger at that age, it also helps you navigate adult relationships years ahead of your peers.*) Abusive guardians. (*Your daddy's a wretched drunk and blunt as a rusted hook, but you never doubt that he loves you. He hates himself, he's frustrated by a mediocre working-poor existence, he thinks you're his most treasured possession and for those early years he's yours too.*)

It's humbling. For every young man he sees fall to drugs, or bad blood, or a complete absence of reason with just the bad luck of being in the wrong spot in the wrong neighborhood, he comes back to it to think, and smoke, and try to ground himself.

The bed of irises and day lilies has always been strange to him. It's common as shit here, day lilies with their big red, yellow, and orange heads heavy under their own weight, praying. March to October they unfold at almost every house on the street, like somebody called a meeting and handed off russet brown bulbs to form a congregation. They thrive even in the mildewed damp of summer, and Will imagines what it would have been like to pick them. He never does - he disturbs as little about the house as he can, like it's a historical ruin.

But the irises are unseasonal and unwelcome in the baked dirt of the garden beds, big bright indigo punches of color that bloom and fade in a couple of days. He doesn't ever really get to see them for more than a day - the cleaning crew comes and tends the hedges, the tissue thin petals wilt, and Will wanders into another case, unable to visit at night and see if the one just peeking open is finally ready to be seen, or even be able to tell it apart from the others.

He finds himself here again now, but instead of his dress blues or office collared shirts and slacks, he's in the cold damp of his shop clothes which have taken on the particular heaviness of sea water left to sit. There's no one on the street in the peculiar liminal space of his head - he doesn't know who really lives here, and Will supposes he's never cared to find out. All the stems are closed today, standing tall and important. Will knows what color they will be, but finds himself anxious to see them open anyway - he has time.

There's an old bench on the porch, a white wrought-iron thing that's grown yellow and orange at the seams from where the rust is eating it. Will half expects when he sits down that he'll fall clear through, maybe through the porch while he's at it into the clay-dirty ground further still. Impacted and compacted by flood waters, three hundred years of humanity shifting against each other, the sediment of swamps. He can rest there just as surely as any other place.

It's a little lonely on the porch, with the bench groaning under his weight. He lights the cigarette, and waits in the noiseless quiet of the street, undisturbed in a way he thought he wanted.

Someone will be by to call him soon. There's always another report coming in on the radio, paging him, walking into his head and his house like they own the place, and Will, happy for the company and the new skin of someone else's perception to wear, lets them.

Waking with the ventilator tube is far too close to waking with the sensation of Abigail Hobbs' ear fighting its way up his throat. It is unyielding, and it hurts as it presses up against the soft tissues of his throat and palate. His first thought on opening his eyes and gagging is that if he can keep the ear down, everything will be ok. They can start again. Everything will have been a dream. It's his mistake, choking up that kind of solid reality.

Everything's dim, so surely it's night. A nurse, Rana with the long black hair, is standing over him when the room begins to consolidate into recognizably beige and soft tones. He knows her round-brown eyes from before, in the spring. Her pretty accented English. They are warm when she sees him see her. Her scrubs are wreath-green, and someone's stuck a tree sticker to the front of them.

She says something, trying to calm him even as he glances around the edges of the room, and from behind her the great shadow of something rises to join her. Will thinks she is trying to comfort him. He wants to beg off the attention - what a huge inconvenience it is for him to be in her hospital again. A pen light is shined in his eyes and he winches appropriately, choking around the breathing tube. It hurts. If he could move his hands, he'd free his mouth to speak, pull this weed of a device from his throat.

(*And what is wrong with your hands, stuck to the side of this bed?*)

They page the ICU attending doctor, and the shadow stays in the corners of his vision, inky and close. Will wants to beg off its attention too, but he's happy for the solidness of the company, even as he's falling back asleep, doing his best to ignore the hard push of the tube in his throat, and regulate his breathing for a moment longer.

The second time Will wakes up, it's to the cold sensation in his IV catheter and the low hum of an apheresis machine.

He absolutely hated it the first time, and hates it now.

Watching the system of tubes process the plasma and blood from each other with his sketchbook in hand is Hannibal, who's face is bandaged in places, and yellowed and black in others. On a small side table, an ice bag is resting on a rag, as well as a number of papers that Hannibal has written notes on. He can't read them. Will thinks it might be daytime, but the curtains are drawn, and he's not able to ask anyone to open them. The breathing tube is an unalterable part of his body now.

When Hannibal spies Will's open eyes, he gives him a tight smile, easing his sketchbook closed quietly instead of the jaunty snap that he usually gives books when interrupted. He never looks at the page he was last on - Will assumes he just remembers without thinking about it.

"There you are," he whispers. "An unpleasant return to the previous state of affairs, but necessary," Hannibal says, rising to stand next to the rail of the swing bed. "I did say you were experiencing a recurrence" he prods, kindly, giving one of the hairs next to his ear a little fond tug. "You had a seizure. You're in the hospital, and today's December 18th."

Three, maybe four days?

Hannibal must see the confusion in his face. "You've been sedated since you were admitted. You're a very uncooperative, twitchy patient, Will."

Will tries to roll his eyes, but ends up just frustrated by the ventilator, wheezing around it. Hannibal, seeing his hands claw up with the desire to rip it out, rubs very gently at the temples of his forehead, tracing the zygomatic ridge and soft skin around his eyes.

"It's alright, Will," says Hannibal, bringing a hand down to his, strapped to the bed. "A couple rounds of this, and you'll be breathing on your own again. You'll be home with the dogs in time for Christmas." He passes a thumb over the taped skin of his IV, rolling the IV needle, so very carefully. Will pictures it pushing at his insides, never quite hard enough to tear. "We'll make an event of it."

Like that matters to Will. Like it's not enough to just have someone there to keep his hand warm through this, where it was so lonely last time. He goes to sleep again with Hannibal's hand around his, pulling more tangles from his hair.

When he wakes a third time, it's not to the nurse or to Hannibal, but Beau sitting in the pink plastic chair near the window, irritably going through a newspaper, The Oregonian, where the only thing of interest on the cover of the local news segment is ***Whale Watching To Be at Its Best This January*** , with a jaunty amateur shot of a whale breaching water in some anonymous ocean picture.

He's fairly certain he's having another dream, but there's a particular persistence to the smell of nicotine and brut cologne that makes Will's nose wrinkle with both distaste and familiarity, something akin to a nice cigar despite the cheap ingredients. He's smelled it on and off his entire life.

Will shakes his head very shallowly - he hasn't seen Beau in over a year. They had an early Easter breakfast at the diner nearest to Beau in Savannah, and Will isn't sick yet, or overwhelmed by profiling, and they stumble through a fairly normal conversation about Deepwater Horizon and the commercial fishing industry in the gulf. Beau wants to try and visit an old friend in Manitoba. Will thinks he'll be able to visit around Thanksgiving - maybe they can make a trip of it.

(*Surprise ending - you didn't. You couldn't. That Beau accepts a rushed apology in October between cases, and a total lack of communication through the winter is pretty indicative of your life as adults; you are two bull elk with their own ranges.*)

No breathing tube though, unlike last time - that's an instant improvement, even if he does have the vague sensation that he's about to be scolded, like he's hid a frog in his pants drawer rather than kicked a man in the neck until he doesn't have a neck as much as an unfortunate amalgam of connective tissues and bone.

Will hopes Beau doesn't know about this part. Will hopes Hannibal, in a completely naive interpretation of his and his father's relationship, has called the old gator from his swamp and his dog thinking that it will comfort Will. Will hopes this goes like every hard-won teacher's conference in his youth, where the feedback is confusing, but acceptable. (*"So you says he's doin' fine on his grades, jus' don' like talkin' much," he deadpans, in his cleanest button-up that holds creases like an accordion, stained on one of the front tails from dropping fries*

there last month. It doesn't come out at the laundromat. "Don't sound like much o' a problem, t' me.") Will is an absolute collection of hopes that he's afraid to show the class when he finally gets brave enough to let his Daddy know he's here with him.

When he pulls himself up, what he gets out is a rough cough out instead of a hello, or a smart statement.

Beau, in a motion Will has seen hundreds of times, looks over the top of his newspaper, reading glasses pressed firm to his nose. The tops of his dark salt-and pepper eyebrows sit like gables over the tortoiseshell acrylic, severe as always. Will could close his eyes and be nine years old, coming out of his bedroom at 7 in the morning. He could be a high school freshman, sleeping off a growth spurt. He's indescribably and forcefully glad to see him.

"There you are," he says, flicking the paper in half. "Thinkin' you'd sleep th' whole time 'til your compatriot come back here lookin' like he done bein' chased for th' day."

It's hard to imagine Hannibal looking chased, but it must be true. Will forgets sometimes that Beau is a good read of character too, albeit the sly kind, always watching for a crooked deal, or a bad actor. Daddy leads a rough life, but it's his and he guards it like a junkyard mutt.

"What brings you to this neck of the woods?" Will rasps, having to take deep breaths. "I didn't think Hannibal would leave an impression...positive enough to seek him out a second time."

"I didn' exactly call him up t' chat," Beau smiles, putting his paper down on the little side table that Hannibal had drawn at. The window curtains are open - it's nice out on the harbor.

"So he called you up to say I was a mess that needs cleaning up," Will infers.

"It's th' holidays, boy. He paid for th' ride," Beau drawls. "Boarded th' dog, faxed your intake sheet to th' ol' boss at the port, said he's wantin' you t' have company." His daddy struggles for a moment, mouth twisted into a frown, scratching at the silver and light brown hairs of his scruff. "Don' feel I add much company with you's sleepin' and all, but seems you get me for company anyhow."

“Where’s Hannibal at?” Will asks, almost hesitant to ask.

“Runnin’ errands, meetin’ people,” he replies, giving a vague gesture. “Lots’o obligations, your Doctor Lecter has. Seemed concerned you might be by yo’self, needed someone t’ keep an eye on you.”

Will hasn’t been awake enough to really consider what the last few days have been for Hannibal, what still needs tying off, what still needs cauterization. It irritates Will to think of Hannibal just casually throwing his father into the mix, like it’s a little family trip, like it’s not showcasing Will’s lifetime of fragile moments to the only person who’s seen the most of them, breaking a decade streak of just not talking about them, like that means they didn’t happen.

“He shouldn’t have called you,” Will says, more apologetic than angry. “You’ve got your own life - I’m going to be fine.”

(*Despite all the upheaval of the year. Despite the bad decisions, the drinking, the isolation. Despite the old house, despite the no-doubt impounded boat. Despite one crime of passion, and one of rock-solid deliberation. Despite Hannibal.*)

Beau, steely eyed and gravelly voiced around a smoker’s cough, just leans in to pat Will’s hand.

(*Because of Hannibal.*)

“You’s th’ only constant in my life,” says Beau, big fingers clasping Will’s wrist atop the fleece blanket. He’s always had much broader hands than Will’s, cracked at the palms and joints of the fingers from calluses and creases from a hard-lived existence. They itch at his skin like the burrs, but they’ve always done that. He has a big cheap metal watch that’s cold where it meets the air, hot where it encircles his skin. “It’s a small thing t’ visit. Anything he do t’ keep you goin’ longer than me? He got my blessin’,” he shrugs.

They’re not ones for big gestures - physical affection practically burns when neither can escape the room, so it’s almost an electric shock to feel the grip on his arm. It’s something for *goodbye, I love you, see you soon, text me if you’re up late, text me if you’re up early.* Beau, in traditional Graham fashion, cracks his neck, stands, and moves away like it would literally hurt him to maintain eye contact.

Beau gives a grim smile. “‘Sides, I’m here in time fo’ the steelhead fishin’.”

Well, that’s more like him.

He excuses himself to go outside and let the nurse know Will’s awake - it’s been an hour since his last cigarette, and Beau is a clock-work man at heart, even if his clock keeps changing walls to hang on. Will, breathing easier without the machines and in the keep of his elderly father for the first time in years, let’s the nurse check him without a fuss. He listens to her talk about her two girls at home, her greatest pride, and what they'll get from Santa.

For the next couple of days, Hannibal and Beau rarely share space for more than 15 minutes at a time, speaking from the doorway to each other. They don’t seem hateful about it, or even that they necessarily dislike each other, but Will comes under the impression that they are doing their best to keep him out of the conversation. If he’s awake, they take it outside. If he’s on the edge of sleep between the minblowing combination of the steroids, barbiturates, and pain killers, they keep things vague in the corner of the room.

(*Even glassy eyed and quiet, you are a sharp knife in the drawer. Both of them know it.*)

It’s all polite, as much as Beau Graham is capable of politeness, but it’s a remote kind of polite. Hannibal brings Beau to-go orders from the diner. Beau brings Hannibal car keys, overnight-shipped documents, and small things from the house. Will suspects they have a brief meal together at some point, because Hannibal has never seen a familiar mouth he didn’t want to feed.

Beau's staying at the house with the dogs at night, minding the particulars of the day to day. Will winces and expresses that it's unfortunate that he's having to stay on an air mattress and wouldn't he be happier in a hotel where he has his own space and less books to serve as furniture?

"Oh no, got a whole new bed and mattress t' keep me company. Much rather 'dat than some square box with a tap in th' corner," says his daddy, deep in another newspaper. The *Daily Astorian* proclaims the lighting of the pier Christmas tree was wildly successful. There's nothing on missing persons, job openings at Fish & Game, or mystery bodies found elaborately posed somewhere portentiously chosen.

Will can't find it in him to ask after any of it, feeling scraped from the inside out by the remnants of the plasma treatments, and lets the slow boredom of the hospital and the drugs keep him calm. He does however sigh at the idea of having Hannibal buy furniture for his bedroom after all. It's a sympton of a small thing. He feels like he doesn't know what he needs to do next, only that the longer he's separate from it, the harder it will be to reel everything all back in and make sense of it.

The hospital counselor asks to visit him at some point when Hannibal is gone and Beau is down the hall, allegedly looking for coffee. She wants to know a curious thing - if he'd like to make a statement to a police officer, or if he needs any kind of resources to decide what to do next.

She's soft-spoken, a little young to be assigned to Will, kind of afraid to speak up. Her shiny, silver nametag says ***Phueng Chanthara-Wilson, LCSW, Columbia Behavioral Health and Counseling*** , and Will isn't prepared for her round-faced earnestness. (*Or counseling - you have a bad track record with that, don't you* ?) For 10 long seconds of uncomfortable gawking silence, Will soundlessly freaks the fuck out with the least evidence of it that he can manage.

(*This is the part you've never practiced. You had the advantage of a solo presentation with Freddie. This go-around, you weren't awake for the most important parts of the tale, where the narrative gets decided. This is the part in the story where you're supposed to have corroborated statements, spoken about anything that's happened since you found yourself in the ICU again. How much did the hospital see of your outfit? What time did you arrive -*

early morning? Mid-day? What did Hannibal tell them, and what are you supposed to? Are the police already involved? Has anyone even sent out a missing persons' report for Edmund Ferris? Has anyone been interviewed? Where is the boat? Where is the body?)

(*What the* fuck *are you supposed to say??*)

The counselor sighs, and points to his heavily bandaged hand.

"Your...uh, partner," she stutters a little. She's hugely uncomfortable, pushing loose strands of black hair around the shell of an ear. "When he brought you in, he mentioned you had a fight. Something about your house while out on the water. The attending physician asked me to come by and see you when you were awake and he was gone, just in case you needed some safer options. I'm going to run through a couple of basic questions," she adds seriously, like it will make him think harder about his reply. "Same thing I ask everyone, so don't feel pressured to answer."

Her clipboard has little stickers of clovers and smiling bees on it and she speaks in precious, lilting tones. Fresh out of college, maybe. A child counselor, not accustomed to asking grown men if the other grown man they've been fucking is also beating them out of sight and mind of small town America. It's a tall task for someone who wants to help, but doesn't know the best response when everyone's a rotten spot on the fruit.

"Have you ever felt threatened or abused by your partner?" she asks.

Will says nothing for half a second before he absolutely bleats with laughter.

(*Yes. You can't believe you're actually going to have to say no. Hannibal continues to confound you with what a bastard he is.*)

Will shakes his head, and the counselor seems to take that as *what a ridiculous question* , instead of the very real *oh dear god, yes, I've gotten so acclimated to being held and then being eviscerated shortly after that I think it might be a kink at this point* . This is fine - in the greatest turn of irony that he thinks he's experienced, it is counterproductive for someone to think Hannibal is a threat.

She nods, checks something off, and continues. “Are you in danger now, and would you like to go to a shelter or talk with someone?”

Again, Will shakes his head. Really he just wants to go home and curl up on the couch with his dogs and listen to Hannibal fuss with something in the cabinets, perpetually preparing for the first honest-to-god homecooked meal the white house has hosted. How can he possibly explain the worst of the abuses have passed, and all the recent ones weren’t ever meant for him? Who does he even talk to about getting irrevocably entwined in the life of a serial killer?

“Are you sure?” Pheung Chanthara-Wilson seems unhappy. “It’s just...your hand isn’t really something to laugh about.”

“I think I gave as good as I got,” Will he tries to say gently, thinking of the riot of blooming contusions that made the bulk of the right side of Hannibal’s face, where even now Will can picture the tiny bones of his pinky finger and palm splintering with the force of striking. His throat is still sore and achy from where the ventilator has been pressing on his palate, and it comes out a bit raspy.

She smiles a little bit. “He certainly looks like it,” she says, tapping her pen, willing to be reassured.

“Not a normal thing for us at all,” he lies, and Will, only too willing to lie, asks instead about de-escalation techniques for in the future, like he didn’t have them drilled into him at the police academy, like he doesn’t feel the sting of excitement when successfully hurting Hannibal as he has no doubt Hannibal does when successfully deceiving him. Her advice is very appropriate for kids, which maybe isn’t too far off from what they need anyway, two Masters and two Doctorates between them or not.

It’s late at night the day before Will is to be discharged from the hospital that Hannibal sits in the ugly peachy-pink plastic chair next to him, lights turned off and door shut, and gives him a run-down of exactly what he’s missed, just in case anyone asks. Like this is a polite

conversation about his most recent hike on the coast instead of a sequence of events that Will needs to put to memory, and play-act as close to as he can.

"You couldn't tell me a little sooner?" Will sighs through a whisper, irritated. "What if the cops had come to ask about...well, you know, you. Or me."

"Nothing indicated that would come to pass," Hannibal replies, as confident as ever, though a little less believably so with the Texas-sized black bruise that snakes from his eye down to the tip of his jaw along the edges. Will suspects he's a little smug that his nose is largely unscathed. Will gives him a long look, disbelieving. Hannibal gives Will a small, crooked smile at his exasperation that must hurt. "Oh come now Will, I'm sure both you and I know that this is something I am *exceedingly* skilled at."

"They think you started beating the hell out of me and I retaliated," Will bluntly responds to that, watching Hannibal's hands give a little twitch. Something about that statement bothers him. Maybe somebody's bothered him about the statement.

Will can give Hannibal this much - the best deceits are the kind hidden in a pile of truths, and Hannibal is an excellent study of picking highlights that work best for his version of events.

When unconsciousness comes for Will like a wave after the shocks of the seizure pass, Hannibal does the medically sensible thing for once: he uses the short wave radio to request assistance. Will is dressed in his spare musty clothes that are kept in the ship's cabin, and Hannibal, deepening the wound over his eyebrow, makes a mess of Will's sleeve and the surrounding interior with the furiously dripping splatter of a headwound. Can't have a domestic dispute without evidence of their particular brand of domesticity, right?

The Coast Guard, doing their early morning drills, finds Daisy floating mid-channel near the mouth of the river, and gives them a swift tow back to the harbor and a connecting drive to the hospital where Will is received with a full description of his symptoms, recent medical history, previous treatment plan, and several recommendations from Hannibal, who a nurse angrily follows, trying to suture the cut on Hannibal's brow.

(*Your morning shift nurse, elderly Freda with the frizzy grey hair and doughy warm hands, tells you later that Hannibal refuses the assistance, and sits in your ICU room with his own needles and suture wire, pulling his cut together like tying a tie, ICU staff watching in abject*

incredulity only once you have been sedated, intubated, and set to rest. "Surgeons are ridiculous," Freda grumbles. You guess he did tell you himself he prefers to do these sorts of things himself.)

Hannibal calls Beau after that, or sometime during - there's very little time to take care of things to his satisfaction, and Will needs the representation with the hospital staff while he is unable to speak for himself. Beau is very obliging - it's almost the holidays after all, and where should he be if not with his only son?

Where Ferris' body is, despite protestation, isn't revealed to Will.

"It's taken care of," says Hannibal.

Confident, quiet, business-like. Like the dry cleaning has been taken to the launderers, or the contractor will take measurements on Wednesday.

This is as Will asked, no, demanded. Will can still picture the hot air flowing out of him, the crunching of river pebbles and sand, caught in places where blood has coated his shoe. It's because this is something that he asked for that Will doesn't pursue it further, even as he feels infuriated by it. It was a group project - he'd like a part in the final grade.

For the rest of his stay in the hospital, Hannibal refuses to divulge anything further. Will guesses there's a bit more to it than that, but Hannibal insists it's better he doesn't know.

(*Nothing to lie about if you don't know what's the lie.*)

Hannibal favors his broken hand and mangled wrist as one restoring glass, and jealously guards his company from anyone that would think to disturb his attentions, or remove Will from the workbench.

It’s Christmas Eve, and coming home is exhausting. Will’s had enough of checking in and out of hospitals over the last year that he’s pretty sure they should just give him some kind of punch card. Maybe he gets a free appendectomy or a credit on his next CT scan if he gets eight visits in a row.

Beau, not exactly a people person to begin with and only resigned to sitting in the ICU because he’s next of kin and Will is grateful for it, is not especially helpful through this process, not one for medical establishments or for paperwork, pharmacists, or for listening to Hannibal thoroughly grill every employee of the hospital that has the misfortune to encounter him. He opts to take Daisy out for a little pass around the bay, “as a favor to me,” Hannibal explains, when Beau isn’t accounted for. Will’s happy to let him have the breathing space.

(*You could use a little of your own - the two of you were not built for cohabitation. You’ve accepted Hannibal as being part of your environment, but Beau has no such attachment, aloof as a leopard looking for its own tree.*)

Each step to the car is an effort. He remembers this part, this terrible weakness, but so much of it was spent in a cell under the mental hospital and so little challenging himself with the functions of a day to day life. The idea of even taking the dogs out sounds herculean in strength. If Hannibal wasn’t here to drive him home, Will might have just slept on the bench outside.

The little white house on his hill is invitingly familiar, his bushes of holly beginning to fruit with little red and white berries in the hedgerows. Winston and Buster look out from the living room windows, barking in anticipation. Will tries to keep his spirits up, opening the front door, but at the first glance to the stairs he needs to climb, he grits his teeth. Walking is already a struggle - now his house is an inconvenience as well.

Seeing his hesitation, Hannibal scoops him up, just as casual as a Sunday afternoon, and starts towards the stairs. Will would like to say he doesn’t squawk, but he does, loudly.

“I am 37 years old,” Will intones as one threatening to shoot a gun.

“Yes, a very feeble one. You’ll be back to your usual, miserable attitude but enduring, hard-headed strength soon enough, and then you may return the favor and carry me instead when I

throw out my back doing this. Agreed?”

Will feels hot in the face, but ends up grumbling something like an ok. Part of this is embarrassment, and another part is the mortifying reminder that Hannibal knows how to carry deadweight like a lifting champion, or a crossfit nut. In fact, Will would like to suggest adding crossfit to his schedule - it would explain away a lot of his emphatic weirdness, and make Will consider less often his tendency to cart human bodies around like inconvenient kettlebells. “Oh, Hannibal takes crossfit seriously,” he’d say, and everyone in the room would instantly understand and not at all suspect him of grisly murder and dismemberment. It conjures pictures of throwing rubber tires instead of torsos onto stag heads.

“There are two sets of stairs,” Hannibal deadpans as the kitchen, white, black, and familiar opens up before them. “Do you intend to writhe up both of them?”

Will, being greeted by the dogs with the enthusiasm of small maelstroms, feeling the press of cold noses on his knees and the prancing clicking of their nails on the hardwood floor, just shakes his head, overwhelmed to be able to be home. When Hannibal puts him in a bridal carry for the second set of stairs, he almost finds his sense of offense again, but it’s nice to be held for a moment, and it’s not like anyone but him can actually see it. It lasts for all of 10 seconds, and being put down is almost a disappointment.

He’s expecting some four-poster monstrosity of a bed when they get to his room, but to his shock and awe, the air mattress sits inelegant and as solitary on the floor as ever, albeit with more pillows and an actual proper set of sheets on it.

“I thought you bought a bed,” Will says in a daze.

“You have two bedrooms in your house," Hannibal declares as though he's just conjured the second one, "though seeing as you never use the second, I am unsurprised by your confusion. I bought a bed for the spare bedroom, so Beau had somewhere to sleep,” Hannibal explains, and leaves it at that. Will, unaccountably grateful, just eases himself down, lays flat, and accepts the inevitability of a nap coming on. “We had an agreement - I’m not to bother *your* bedroom, yes?”

“Yeah,” Will nods, and reaches a hand to pull the hair tie out. Hannibal beats him to it, almost too rough, but they both smile.

Will wakes up in the dark, Winston to his left and his arm very carefully pulled away from his body and framed by towels to keep him from rolling onto it. The door to the room is cracked, where the hall lights are all on, and Buster is dancing back and forth across the hall to where he can hear Hannibal and Beau, talking in low tones.

" - the interviews will likely end at this point. There seems to be a general disinterest in pursuing it further, but the only complication was yours to dispose of."

There's a sigh, and a long pause.

"You already know it's done," says Beau, sharp, astringent, like biting into a sour plum. "You didn' leave much behind for me t' do, but I ain't complainin' for more work."

Another pause.

"I thank you for your discretion in this - truthfully, I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to help."

Beau laughs.

" *Of course* you did. No need t' start lying 'bout it now," he says, and Will hears ice rattle in a glass, probably already having knocked out the Crown Royal and well into his own purchases - it's been at least a week, and Will knows his Daddy's pace.

"Don't know *your* story, but he'd a done it for me, prob'ly cleaner," he continues after a noisy swallow. "A rare oppor *tunity* t' do th' same for him." There's a shuffling noise, his father's booted feet on the old wood of the hallway, probably dirty. He's never been one to take shoes off at the door. "Told you he's like me. Told you he don' take well to influence, but you's here anyway, and I guess so am I."

(*An old line you think of often: Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin. It's new frontier to share a sin* - do *you share a sin?*)

Will starts drifting off again. Whatever Hannibal's reply is gets lost to the fuzziness of sleep. He's getting kind of sick of missing things while he's between awarenesses, but he has the sensation of needing to. It keeps a secret alive, the stillness of plants growing beneath snow, waiting for the warm sun.

act 5 - there is nothing new under the sun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Christmas dawns with the quietude of a rainy day, windows cold and wet from fighting between the windy chill outside and the heater. It makes the house feel more enclosed than it actually is, high white ceilings made familiar like an older relative's house instead of this strange shell he's been inhabiting. It's grown on him, the austerity of it, but sometimes he has the feeling of staying in hotel rooms, just one more bad night of sleep and a leaky sink to complete the image.

There's nothing that overtly says "festivities!" to him, other than a bright red and green huntsman plaid that has replaced the grey fleece blanket that has kept him company in the hospital. When he slowly makes his way down to the kitchen where the counter is littered in gathered mail, medical intake forms and release papers, and a very creative array of unwashed jam jar glasses and nice crystal, he supposes the assortment of colors will have to do. All the junk mail has been theatrically colored for the holiday, and this is the only reason why the dove grey of a familiar envelope stands out to him.

Ask and ye shall receive, Will thinks, flipping the envelope over to see the scrawl of Hannibal's handwriting and the bizarreness of Will's on address. He's never had private mail here, not anything worth nothing. Handwritten thank you notes from the dentist don't count - that's good marketing, not personal. Will suspects he could find another note or two in the pile from Frank, or maybe even a well-meaning message from Lori who cares about these kinds of things, but the thick paper of the grey envelope is glaring in it's obviousness, and there's something that feels like bookending his life to let Hannibal's Christmas card be the first to meet his hand.

"The paper is quite thick," Will hears from the couch, where he has failed to see Hannibal, laying low and drowsing on the blue cushions with Buster pressed as close as his body can get to the side of Hannibal's leg. (*You, having spent a fair amount of time in the same position with the dog, know that Buster is only not in his face because Hannibal instructs him not to, and unfairly, Buster listens.*) "I doubt even with your impressive insight that you'll be able to divine the content."

Will turns the card again, where the redness of wax seals it shut. "Just enjoying the novelty of it," Will says with a gravelly voice and a half-hearted shrug. "I don't get much mail. Real mail," he adds. "I get bills like I'm in the business of collecting debt."

“Unplanned incarcerations and hospital visits have a tendency to produce ample amounts of wasted paper.”

“You’d know - you sorted my mail last time too. I’ve got one of two for sure this time around,” Will says with a glance over to Hannibal. “Should I be expecting some unplanned incarcerations to go with my most recent tour of the local medical facilities?”

“Am I your keeper?” asks Hannibal, sitting up to roll his shoulders.

Will shrugs. “You seem to be the only one that knows when I’m about to experience one or the other.”

The grey morning light doesn’t do much to brighten Hannibal’s face. He looks very tired, but Will’s irritated to note it’s still damnably satisfied. “To answer your question, not if I can help it,” Hannibal says wryly, rising to put the dog down on the floor, and meet Will in the kitchen. “it’s rather against my grain these days to be without your company.” He looks uncommonly crumpled in a sweater and collared shirt. The hair on the back of his head has gone long and unstyled in the hours between bringing Will back home and now. Will secretly thinks that it’s only right that even Hannibal Lecter is subject to a rough night of sleep on the sofa periodically, and to actually look the part.

Hannibal, not at all bothered by Will’s scrutiny, just gives a small smile. “If it would satisfy you to hear it, I think that our early morning exercise has gone mostly unnoticed.”

“It wasn’t smooth,” Will retorts. “You’re a person of interest. You’ve been interviewed,” he states, like it’s irrefutable. He tries not to think of what he’s heard through the door, of the many private conversations that Beau and Hannibal have likely shared in the days past. Will doesn’t want to admit to eavesdropping, even if it is his own house that he dropped an eave in.

Hannibal seems to think this is funny, smiling wider, moving to grab a French press hidden in the corner of the kitchen. “I’ve been interviewed by Jack Crawford and had nothing come to light. What makes you think that the Astoria police would fare much better than a federally

appointed agent and head of the Behavioral Sciences department?”

“Lack of attachment,” Will starts, listening to Hannibal with a growing frown. “Lack of personal stakes in the outcome. The necessity of improvisation over a multiple year kill cycle. I don’t really know how you’ve avoided leaving anything but deliberate forensic evidence in all the years that you’ve been in the Baltimore area, but it’s kind of a naive thing to assume everything goes perfectly every time,” he says quietly, watching Hannibal prepare water for coffee. “It’s also a huge assumption to say I’m resolved or satisfied the outcome. Clearly you are,” he grumbles.

"I am unsatisfied with the cost it had to you," says Hannibal.

"Then maybe don't do it?" Will snorts.

The beans are ground, the filter placed. Hannibal lets the water sink into the french press, and Will seethes. Will assumes Hannibal is letting him have his little fit, like these aren’t all issues, that Will’s not a forensics expert well beyond Hannibal’s education. Cleanly habits are not the same as untraceable ones. A surgeon’s fastidiousness is evidence just as much as the lack of hairs, saliva, bite marks, fibers - Will’s seen it all. At the end of the day, without those things, he saw Hannibal, and that’s enough to put the fear of someone else doing it too.

Watching Hannibal press the grounds down, Will feels another bitter note roll into his brain. Wrapping bystanders into unwitting culpability is certainly a terrible way to bury something you don’t want seen.

Will breathes in the smell of coffee, takes a mug, and holds it between chilled hands. He stares at it, and soon after at Hannibal, gone still watching Will accept the drink. “What nightmare scenario flared up in your head that made getting my father involved make sense?” asks Will. “I won’t act like I understand whatever the two of you discussed in Georgia, but Beau Graham is hardly a pinnacle of discretion.”

“So you did hear something of that,” says Hannibal, facing it head on. He nods. “I had wondered if you would. You of course know him very well, but I found him to be just the opposite. Tight-lipped and solemn as a statue about things he doesn’t want to discuss.”

“Are you as subtle as that every time?” asks Will waspishly. “Closing the door firmly seems as good a place as any to start on your due diligence. Can’t imagine what the interview tape sounds like.”

“By all rights, you should have been dead asleep, courtesy of a different doctor’s cocktail of drugs I’d like to point out."

“Oh ***yes***,” Will says with a laugh and a wide arc of the arms, “how *could* I forget the early morning reminder that *this* time it wasn’t you.”

The pause that follows is a bit awkward, something that Will thought they had left behind. He guesses he should know better. He’s not left it behind at all.

(*Aren’t you lucky this time wasn’t as bad? Aren’t you tired of giving this lesson? Slowly but surely it sinks in, as calcite builds in caves, degrees of offence removed as Hannibal learns* ***you don’t like that*** *, but my god, how exhausting to roll that stone up the hill over and over again* .)

“You should leave,” Will says, watching the steam rise from his mug. He considers pouring it down the sink. Across from him, Hannibal looks something like alarmed - his only tell is a furrowing of his blonde brows, usually smooth as a lake.

Will shakes his head. “For a few hours - this is the first time I've been home and not strung and decorated like a Christmas tree. I don’t know what to do with you,” he sneers. “I want to think about it without you looming over me reciting something tedious like Saint Benedictus or Marcus Aurelius or some other profound ethics bullshit. Can we just have a nice holiday to sit in...I don’t know, quiet reflection that it’s a goddamn miracle we’re all still here? That it’s not ruined *this* time?”

Hannibal says nothing, but nods, looking to the side and out the window.

It takes an hour, when all the social niceties are taken care of and Beau is made aware of the change in schedule and when to remind Will to take his next round of supplements and prescriptions to which, ha, fat chance Beau remembers, but Hannibal does in fact leave.

The couch is a good spot to think. It's long enough to lay out fully and stare at the light fixture, scalloped tin medallion behind it like a mandala, and the empty whiteness of the ceiling. It takes him about an hour to stop thinking and to rest. Bending in the grip of his fingers, the grey of the envelope is flat and bold against the navy of the velvet.

It's only when it's been some time since Hannibal excuses himself to head back to the loft and see to some sort of meal for the evening, and a couple hours pass to usher in a pleasant, clear skied afternoon, that Will feels bold enough to pull his letter out of its white-fingered hold, and see what Hannibal describes as a Christmas card.

Beau is on the porch, reading over a dog-eared copy of Jack London's short stories with a styrofoam cup of coffee in hand and a granny square knitted blanket from Will's collection thrown over his shoulders while he sits in the chilly December afternoon sun - the sky is very blue beyond him. Will has no TV, but Beau is capable of great stillness and focus when needs drive. He likes to read sometimes. Will knows he'll go down the street to the sports bar, stubbornly open for Christmas, and stumble back when asked if he tires of the house and of Will, dozing on the couch.

When he breaks the red wax seal and pulls the foiled card from its envelope, Will is met by what feels like a novel's worth of rice paper inserts, all tidily covered in Hannibal's slanted, curving writing. It's more than the average holiday platitudes - Will thinks he should probably have guessed this would happen. Hannibal loves to talk, so why would he not also love to write?

Pulse throbbing between his fingers, in his chest, in his tongue pushed against the roof of his mouth, Will opens the first leaflet. His name is a beacon.

Dear Will, it reads.

Will closes his eyes, and begins again on a count of three.

Dear Will,

I am thinking of your honest accounting of the year, and what that means to you. I am thinking you do not wish to hear about developments in my business practice, research collaborations with fellow physicians, and charitable endeavors through the many months, and ones for the months coming. Those are for associates, professionals, acquaintances. I have written the same to them in the same hand a dozen of a dozen times. I have done it here, from this excretable chair, delaying what I am to do about you and your card in turn.

I am looking at you now - very pale and gone soft with sleep. You are more peaceful than you were last year in the same state. You had more to worry about then. You had me to worry about. I guess you still do.

Will rolls his eyes at this, and the magnitude of Hannibal's ego. It's true though - things were harder then, even as things feel hard now from time to time. He thinks of the peppery zing of wolfberries and ginger, and the unspeakably black fibrous threads of Hannibal's chicken soup. It was so good, but it curdles his stomach to remember the taste of it.

There's less pretentions this time around, in this city so far removed from what either of them really knows. There's less time for it.

He continues.

Our year has been epistolary in many ways - disparate notes sent in haste without hope of answer, or rebukes meant to end them. Public records. Small texts. A litany of legal paperwork. Blog posts, though I do not think I've properly described the inherent importance of that to you. It will annoy you when I do, no doubt. I find myself exceedingly grateful for your writing and the writing of others, which are the only things that have led me to this town at the edge of the western world. I would not have chosen it for myself, but the best gifts are often unlooked for.

I had not hoped to meet someone in my life that I would surrender knowledge of my doings to. In a concession to this not originally being of my own design, it should be known you didn't have the knowledge surrendered to you as much as you cleverly plucked it out with those eyes of yours - at great cost to yourself, and at an exaggerated effort on my end to stop you from seeing it as me. I thought to change you, only to find I enjoy that you are

what you are. How strange and wonderful to see these things I've done revealed and understood. I do not pretend that you loved them. One must account for personal taste, or so I've been told.

You've changed on your own in several ways. Confidence, but a humble kind. Defined at your core, and more fluid at the edges, adaptable, but perhaps you've always been so and I am only now seeing it. Still occasionally lonely, but not unfulfilled for lack of your past dealings with the FBI and the sad trailing of manila envelopes filled with the depravities of man. You've become adept at saying no, frequently to me to my distress and pride. You are your own animal, one that is sleeping now, but that I look forward to watching in greater detail when once again in your own territory.

It is still a wonder to me to have seen your own design, for all that I know you would not have chosen it for that hour or at my fault. I wonder how that night would have gone had I woke you, or how long it would have taken to reach this point if I had lain alongside you and slept. I considered it. I imagined it even as your hands sought their vengeance. Perhaps another time. I don't think my face will survive another attempt to circumvent you. More to the point, I do not wish to be without you.

There is so much I wish to see, and more still that I want to show you.

Merry Christmas, Will.

Yours,

Hannibal Lecter

Signed in full, it doesn't feel formal as much as a declaration. Here's the entirety of the man, all of that now Will's in calligraphy and bone char ink.

Will sighs, and leans back into the couch, and holds it like it will evaporate if he lets go.

Beau turns pages in his book, and refills his glass from time to time. Will wedges the dove grey envelope and its contents between the couch cushions where it can go unremarked on.

When the sun starts westering and the light turns golden, he hides it upstairs, in the bedroom, under the floorboard where the clozapine has gone untouched since his hospitalization. It feels like something he's supposed to keep hidden away. Not because he's ashamed of it, or afraid of the contents, but because it belongs to him, and he will decide what to do with it, even if someday that means flushing down a toilet.

Will opts to take a stroll to the dock in the evening once the sun goes down, with Beau in tow. Beau has that itchy look that foreshadows wandering - Will would prefer he wander with him tonight.

He is feeling itchy as well. Between the morning conversation and the letter, Will's day of convalescing is frustrating. He wants to express what he's thinking, but he also thinks he might punch Hannibal if he sees him. He'll have to hold off - Hannibal will be back with something that has been promised to be 'suitably rustic' for the present company. That, and it's Christmas Day after all.

The premise for the walk isn't a stretch for Beau. It's maybe the most familiar thing they could do, ignoring the encephalitis, ignoring Will's hackjob killing, ignoring Hannibal's meddling, and ignoring that Hannibal and Will have an unfortunate tendency to make Beau feel like a third wheel. (*He doesn't complain - your daddy has close to 35 years of being a loner. It feels more rude than it actually is, because you're used to the same.*) They're out to see the Christmas lights in the store fronts, and to get a bit of fresh air. Yuletime spirit in, bad mood out.

Will still feels the dry cracking in his nose from days spent with a nasal cannula, and the circulated air of the hospital. His joints hurt. His legs are swollen. A little sea air would do him a world of good, even if he does feel like a foal trying to stand for the first time when they reach the downtown stretch off the highway, where they can hear the waves hit the pier posts. They stare back up the hill and down the road, where the lampposts have green wreaths in holiday cheer lighting the thoroughfare. It will be slow going back home. He apologizes.

Beau just shrugs, taps a cigarette out of the pack, and says, "Not complainin' 'bout some time outside." He spent all day outside. He'd probably spend all day outside at home in Savannah too.

The string-lights and bulbs that decorate the houses are candy bright in the evening blue, some modern and cold looking, others old and warm with cracked glass shells protecting the filaments inside. Storefronts light up their carefully tended tropical palms and fig trees, hang shining stars in the windows, make chain-link paper garlands far fancier than Will pictures from school crafts he recognizes it from, but the jumble of green wired Christmas lights is the same, generation to generation. It's something out of the 80s for Will, when he's young enough to still enjoy the easy attention his father can give a child that hasn't started fraying at the corners.

Most Christmases were tough for them - not a lot of contract work, not a lot of everyday clients, and Beau, already deep into middle age when Will is in elementary school, is hiding his temper in a bottle most nights and the realization that he's unattached and single parenting in a gruff exterior. Will picks up on this in a child's manner, but doesn't properly understand or appreciate it until he's a middle aged man himself, wondering if they're going to bury him at Quantico in a custodial closet because he never seems to leave. *Here lies Will Graham, unfulfilled and untouchable as social-deficients are doomed to be* .

Neighborhood Christmas lights, however, are free entertainment, and even in bad times Beau can afford a box of cheap powdered hot chocolate with a bit of whole milk. They take chipped mugs and walk the city blocks, picking favorites. Will likes the two-story with the cartoon reindeer on the roof. Beau likes the big Greek Revival home in the old part of town that lights up its porch pillars in green and red, poinsettias from the grocery store clustered like hedges to hide the clumsy wiring. Will thinks Daisy Street has the best ones this year. Beau wants to drive to the rich part of time and see if they actually do it better than the old folks, or if its all just aesthete jeweled white minimalist lines. (*"No character," Beau explains, and you absorb, and carry that attitude long into adulthood.*) Sandusky, Biloxi, Pascagoula, Buffalo, Detroit - same dusty chocolate powder mix, same suburban glow on the snow or the grass or the river and lakefronts. Will wishes he had thought to buy some before coming down the hill with him. They can add another town to their list.

Just a little further down the way, the docks wait in the stillness of the holiday, Astoria frozen for a day. Will tries to catch himself before sighing, but the thought of his last dark-hour foray into the harbor makes him feel dizzy with nerves. Beau, watching him, shrugs a shoulder.

"You wanna take a gander at your Daisy?" he asks. "I can feel somethin' botherin' you like a sore tooth. Been a few long days since you's on th' water. Good to calm th' nerves."

“Don’t think there’s much time for a go around the harbor,” Will shrugs in return, but doesn’t deny it. “My last boat trip didn’t go very well.”

“Scare you’self out of wantin’ t’ be on th’ water?” Beau asks with a long drag on his cigarette.

“No, I guess not,” Will breathes, putting a hand up to his daddy who passes his cigarette like they’ve always been doing it, that it’s not a bad habit that Will picked up from him. He takes a long drag of his own, watching the smoke disappear, and his nerves calm. “Can’t really imagine life without it somehow.”

(*Hannibal’s right - you are constantly flowing from one watershed to another, carrying whatever makes you what you are with you. Nothing changes around you, and you, against all odds, stay what you are too.*)

They turn to the docks, Will’s keys jingling in his hand. They hop aboard, and Will scrambles for the cabin lightswitch.

As expected, the boat has been scrubbed and partially gutted. Unlike what Will expects, it’s also very carefully put back together, with a new low pile marine carpet, an unmemorable grey color that is clean and utilitarian, a far cry from the red shag that Will has learned to tolerate and hate as his month spent aboard necessitated. (*Will you miss the awful way it matted in wet weather and absorbed the smell of mildew, and looked vaguely like an abandoned porn set prop? Obviously not. But you will miss the solid ugliness of it, grounding you in those first lonely weeks. It was a part of the boat, which meant it was a part of home.*) The little galley kitchen has a fresh coat of white paint, and the cushions on the built-ins are now brown, made of the cheap kind of vinyl leather that always looks good with a couple of throw pillows, as long as one never dares sit on it. The storage spaces beneath them are empty, save for a toolbox and a few maintenance items. It smells intensely of lemon-scented ammonia.

There are of course no pillows, so instead it has the solid feeling of Beau’s work, not Hannibal’s. It’s something beyond Hannibal’s ken, refurbishing boats, though given the luxury of time and the know-how, Will suspects he could do a real bang-up job. Will would probably hate it.

When he properly examines the guts of the boat - sensors, gauges, engine valves, the wired lines for the cabin lighting, anything hidden by a fiberglass panel, really - it's as orderly, oiled, and ready for service as a boat as old as Daisy can be. Even the lettering on the back of the hull is fresh and black. It's far beyond a forensic cleanup - it's a restoration.

"Borrowed it t' do a little fishin'. 'Dat Hannibal o' yours was better at managin' you and th' doctors. I'm no good for much other than boats 'n dogs." Beau shrugs, standing on the stern where it is bleached-white clean and gel-coat shiny. The last time Will sees it is when Ferris is wrapped in the stark obviousness of the blue tarp, not bleeding out from the seams yet, but imminently probable. Will was so messy. Will is still a mess.

"Seemed appropriate t' clean up after m'self," Beau adds. "Quite a lot o' work, cleanin' fish."

Will smiles. Beau is a terrible bullshitter, every bit as heavy-handed as a production of King Lear. Will thinks he's proud of it sometimes, wants to be seen just as much as any other person Will dives into. (*"Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise," you think, looking at him in memory and present time.*) "Messy enough to get into the fuse box and the power steering?"

"Consider it a gift," Beau replies, blunt. "Christmas, or some shit. Ain't got much in the way o' money, but I know my way 'round boats. Even you's got t' call me for th' electrical sometimes, boy." Beau smiles, stony. "You done good, but your daddy still know better."

Will doesn't really think they're talking about boats.

(*Don't play stupid. You're not. Talking about boats, or stupid.*)

Will considers Beau for a minute, allows himself to focus the lens of his perception to his father, someone untouchable and staining in that Will recognizes so much of himself in the older man. Where Hannibal touches all the awe and awfulness of the dark parts of his imagination, a scholar without equal, Beau is as familiar and warm as walking into the house from the vacuousness of a cold night. Will's hands are like his. Will's furrowed brow is like his. The rare times that he can see it, Will's smile is like his. He's so easy to read that it feels like walking in on him crying to do it. He feels ashamed when he does.

In the low-light of the cabin and the tiredness of the weeks passed, Will would like to think it's hard to do now, but it's really not.

(*He wants to help you. He's wanted to help you since you were dropped in his arms, smarter than him, more talented than him. The better part of a bad decision that has chased him from town to town. Please take this thing he can do for you. Please don't ask why, or who for, or what he knows. It's only because you are a dark thing doing dark things, and you are made in his image, and he doesn't pretend to understand it beyond that. He's ok with it if you are.*)

(*Are you?*)

"It's different than I would have done, but undoubtedly better," Will says after some length, closing the fuse box cover. "I'm more of an engine guy than a electrician, and the carpet was awful. I hope you gave it some concrete shoes to put it out of its misery."

Beau nods. "From your mouth t' God's ear," he laughs.

Will suspects he did. It's hard to get trace evidence out of thick fibers like that. He turns off the cabin light with a loud ***click***, hops off with help from his father, and tries to put it out of his head. It's taken care of. It's all he asked for. He wishes it hadn't happened. He can be satisfied with how it did.

The walk back up is every bit as miserable as he expects it to be, but there's a tree made of string lights from the very top of the Astoria that Will watches with each step, running from the top of the Astoria Column to the parking lot, looking like a beacon in the relatively clear night sky.

It's kind of a tourist trap, the Astoria Column, something painted with folk art and historical murals, and is made of the usual polymer and sheet metal and rebar of all things built with the intention of creating timeless Americana but are really more of a fall hazard than a piece of the fabric of the city. Everyone unfailingly asks him if he's been yet when he mentions moving to Astoria in February. Will's avoided it, having been dragged across the width and breadth of the country by his father, the FBI, and a year's burden of circumstances. He's seen a lot of unremarkable small town things in his long drive to Oregon.

It’s not like he hasn’t seen it from a distance - it’s a landmark insofar any familiar object is.

Catching sight of it now, as solid and kitchy and endearing as ever, Will thinks he still won’t go visit anytime soon, but that he’s glad it’s there. That it’s an option if he wants.

“Thank you,” says Will, not exactly which thing he’s thanking Beau for. For carrying his erratic son across the country with him, and making sure he never does without, maybe. For the occasional hand up from the couch while he’s weak, for sitting in a cold ICU room with nothing to do save read and watch the harbor he’d rather sail on, for crossing the country to help Hannibal bail Will’s ass out of another stint in prison. (*Again, Hannibal’s fault, but your choice, and isn’t that weird to think about?*)

“Shouldn’t thank me,” Beau grumbles, grabbing for another cigarette. “I just did what you’s supposed to do for your children. What you’ve done for me.”

“So what, I should thank Hannibal instead?”

Beau snorts. “Shouldn’t thank him either. Not anythin’ I see work thankin’, ‘cept ‘dat I could come out. He spins quite th’ yarn when th’ mood takes him.”

That he does, damn the clever son of a bitch. Someday he hopes to hear the full story. Will smiles, sighing around another wave of tiredness, taking it step by concrete sidewalk step.

“I don’ pretend t’ know who you’s runnin’ wit’ these days,” Beau adds, slow to start, hesitant to overstep. “He seems a right terror t’ me, but maybe you’s more like me than I thought. You gather terrors like engine parts, and keep ‘em for when you need ‘em. Leave ‘em behind when you don’t.”

Will feels his mouth twist, amused. “Think I should throw this one out?” he asks.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know,” says Beau, breath dissipating with the last of the daylight turned to darkness. “I haven’t tried throwin’ bad things out, can’t say I could tell you how or if you should. From what I can see, he likes you, but ‘dat he don’t know how t’ proper like somethin’. Hard t’ learn. Gotta decide for you'self if you want t' be patient and see if he does.”

They move in quiet for a while, before turning to comment on the ugly inflatables in the front lawn of a house on Duane Street, gone half limp where the generators don’t fill them with enough air. They agree another house on neighboring Franklin Avenue with simple blue and white lights, probably a Jewish household, probably an older couple, probably childless judging from the unused wicker furniture and the single car in the driveway, have a good setup of waterfalling strands around their porch, parted like curtains around the open-shuttered windows so people can see evergreens wreaths inside with silver glass ornaments and fairy lights. Will thinks he's seen them walking their dog in the evening. He wants to know their names.

He’s passed the house on the way to the whiskey bar many times, but the showcase makes Will appreciate the insight into its normally unremarkable facade beyond the usual Graham decoration effort critique. He hopes he can bring Hannibal to it before they take it all down, see what he thinks, how much he reads it and how similar it is to how Will does.

He supposes that’s not an obligation, but it is an answer.

After dinner, when Beau goes to lay down and Will feels the need to do the same, Hannibal subtly follows him upstairs instead of taking a cue to leave as Will doesn’t give him one. He arranges medications, pours a glass of water, and, very obnoxiously, appears with a blood pressure cuff and the air of one determined to walk a battlefield regardless of the consequences.

Will, softened by the letter, the walk, the good meal, and a simple weariness, just rolls his eyes and holds out an arm. The pills are just as chalky and bitter as the first time. The accompanying nausea chasing the tap water is just as miserable. But Hannibal watches the pressure gauge, two fingers pressed into the crook of Will’s elbow like it’s the most natural place to be, and that’s enough to calm Will’s irritation into something lukewarm.

The mattress is still not really big enough for the two of them, and Hannibal keeps dressed like someone meaning to leave but failing to do so, but they lie in the dark for some indeterminable amount of time, and the sea fog starts to roll in from the Pacific dampening the street lights. There's a red-yellow glow painting the white ceiling from the neighbor's house - she's had a vintage plastic nativity set out since Thanksgiving. (*"How charming," Hannibal snipes one evening, even as he looks delighted by it.)*

"There's a lot I want to show you too," Will says into the stillness of the house. He only knows Hannibal is listening by the way his fingers tighten for the scantest of seconds.

"I know you won't promise to change what you are," he continues, more focused on the shadowed stack of books than on the way his hand is aching, or his heart is pounding. "I can't change what I am either. I can't promise that I won't feel differently about you each time you lie, or that I won't leave again when it's too much."

He pauses, licks at his dry lips, takes a breath.

"If you have things you're hiding that effect me, that could hurt me," he whispers, "please - don't wait for the next Ferris, or the next hospital trip, or the next Abigail Hobbs to tell me. I can't change you, but sometimes I can still understand you, and I want to keep what I can of this - the two of us."

Hannibal is quiet for a long time. When Will is drifting off, going limp under the weight of the sheets and coverlet and Hannibal's arm at his waist, hand coming up to rest between his bad shoulder and his breastbone, Hannibal lets a long breath go.

"Then I'll have to listen better, and pray to not need to follow after," he says into the space between Will's ear and curling hair, like he can plant it directly into the hard carbon of his skull, and carve a bowl-shaped depression for his sometimes beautiful, sometimes oppressive regard. Will, a reflecting pool for it, sleeps easily beneath it tonight.

Will tries very diligently to have Beau stay until New Years Day, because he's family, and because Will's thankful for him keeping him company. (*Because that's the right thing to do when you're relatively certain your father has scattered the incriminating remains of your poorly planned savagery somewhere far afield so that your serial killer friend-enemy-lover doesn't have to account for his time while managing the details. It's the kind of gift you don't ever ask for - it's just given, and nobody mentions it ever again. You and Beau will remember it, like it's its own person in the room sitting next to you.*) The old goat brushes him off at every turn.

Beau feels bad for Evinrude, his blue-tick hound who the next door neighbor is fond of and has been generously compensated to watch in Beau's absence, and Will can sympathize with that. Beau thinks it's no good for him to miss this much work. He doesn't hate his current employer, which marks a significant 9 month stretch of civility for him, which Will can respect. Beau is beginning to miss his own haunts and his own boat, and doesn't want to be stepping on Will's toes. Will nods; he often feels similar when visiting Beau in Savannah. Chiefly amongst all these, Beau doesn't want to wake up to that "poncy, smart-ass" already in the kitchen every morning and not being able to have his canned grounds and machine-made coffee like a decent, country boy. He's had the same coffee in every place he's ever lived in the United States, and the change in routine is putting him in a 'right proper funk'.

Will, nowhere near as committed to a ritual as his father, but sympathetic to the sanding grind of change, has been living that particular reality for the last two months, and still finds himself ok with it. Hannibal's small gestures are well-meant, and are easier to manage than the big ones.

One New Years Eve, Will drives Beau to Portland to catch an early plane back to Savannah. He walks his little rolling suitcase to the front gates, admires the patchwork of colorful splashes on the green carpet of the airport departure lobby, and struggles with what he's supposed to say.

(*Thank him for coming. Thank him for fixing your mistake - even though you've fixed a hundred of his, yours are all-encompassing and drag others into your event horizon. Thank him for sprucing up Daisy, thank him for replacing the good bourbon as well as the bad one. Thank him for not changing as he thanks you for the same. Have a safe flight, daddy, you can say. I love you, you can say.*)

He freezes, frowning.

Beau pulls him in after a moment gone too long, arm around his shoulder, another around his waist. Hugs him tight, where Will still feels tender at the ribs, the kind of crushing comfort that he's craved since the early morning drive to Sandusky from Wolf Trap. It's different from Hannibal, but essential in the same way.

"You alright, son?" Beau says, still tight around him.

Will considers. Will nods. "I'm happy," he says. "Anyway, I'm not dying."

(*Congratulations, a new personal best for Will Graham! Celebratory drinks at 6, dinner at 7.*)

Beau laughs, and Will feels his own mouth drift into a half embarrassed smile. "Well if that's not a glowin' commendation comin' from you, I reckon I wouldn' know one if it bit me in th' ass."

When he disappears into the security gate, Will feels a bit bereft. He's tired, he's probably due for more medication, he missed having coffee. He wishes he could amble through the terminals with his father, maybe make fun of the decidedly trendy shops that try to replicate the downtown experience while also selling fleece gear and marionberry jams on the way out. Taking someone to the airport used to be like that - an extended farewell, just procrastinating.

The feeling chases him through the city, along Highway 30 and the Columbia River, past Clatskanie where Lawrence is likely still going through his morning donuts. It follows him when he sees the Astoria-Megler Bridge, the brick and corrugated metal of warehouses, past the Victorian houses and other crapshack homes until his strange, narrow white house comes into view. Hannibal's monstrosity of a car has taken the street spot in front of it.

Two dogs look out the windows above the tall porch, one standing on the windowsill, one bouncing to see over its edge. The light inside is a rich yellow from the sconces. It melts some of that absence away, fills it with company.

Yes. He's some kind of happy.

Hannibal spends the day at the house, a normal affair for a Saturday that usually has led to him bothering Will about what else could use improvements, or things that he wishes he had done differently. These days are for day trips, sitting on the porch, longer walks. What they haven't been for, at least at Will's house, is food preparation. (*You like to joke that this is a designated facility for the serving of alcohol, and that additional permits will need to be issued for hot-food service. Something about the water heater not producing enough warm water for sanitation and the removal of heavy lipids from the sink drain, and absolutely nothing passing a health department contamination test if Hannibal's at the wheel.*)

While Will floats in and out of a nap on the couch, book in hand, Hannibal has finally given into the desire to cook.

Will, not having fished in a couple of weeks, and certainly never having caught the erstwhile salmon, watches as one watches a fuse burn down to the paper of a bottle rocket. He should put it in the ground, he should prop it up with a brick, he should stop holding it where it can burst at any moment. Instead a mellow calm descends on him. He wants to see what is coming next, how it will present, how he'll feel when it does.

(*You're not stupid after all. Not anymore.*)

It's a several hour process, with Hannibal dressed in parts of a navy windowpane suit and aggressively cranberry red shirt that is hidden by his waistcoat and rolled at the sleeves to keep clear of where he is meticulously slicing herbs and vegetables, making a paste of tomatoes from the morning's farmers market, and what looks to Will like bacon and some manner of red meat wrapped in cheesecloth that has been soaking in brine in a white container that Hannibal has brought with him. It smells of bay leaves and peppercorns. Something you do to soften tough meat.

It's this, with its purple-red veined with the white of fat and lean connective tissue, that Will has a hard time looking away from.

(*“You didn’ leave much behind for me t’ do, but I ain’t complainin’ for more work,” says Beau through the crack in your door, quietly confident, unflappable* .)

Will reads the same line over and over for the greater part of an hour.

There’s the blistering cleanliness of the ship cabin to account for, the conspicuous smell of bleach from the tiny and shitty galley kitchen. Did Beau know where that missing work to do went? Did Hannibal wrap Will up on the floor of the cabin in his spare musty clothes, carefully tending to him, and in a separate but close breath cut from Ferris the muscle from his arms or his legs, like it would be rude to refuse the gift?

(*Yes, you think, is the answer. My kill or nothing, you had asked just weeks ago. Something like that, he had responded.*)

This is the one aspect of Hannibal that Will hasn’t been able to wrap his head around. He’s long since reconciled Hannibal with the modus operandi of elaborate staging - it just fits his character and interests. Why do something as pedestrian as a dump in a forest or the Chesapeake Bay when he can really make a show of it? The taunts, the theater, the obscure references, the small details, these are things that make the Chesapeake Ripper, with one signature component that has always been assumed to be surgical trophies, but is really just ingredients.

He’s toyed with it from time to time, sitting in his hospital cell block or in the old farmhouse kitchen in Wolf Trap, from the wood shop he’s converted his basement into here in Astoria, on the water of the Youngs Bay heading to work while scattering salami and cheese boxes to birds because he never *really* know in those first days Hannibal comes haunting the Columbia mouth.

Could be pride, could be another mockery, could be the God complex. There’s variables for the variables. The only thing Will is certain of is that the trail of corpses leading to Hannibal Lecter don’t deserve their organs.

(*Hannibal likes throwing things in negative, ironies and secrets are the name of the game. Someone was deserving somewhere in the past, when whatever rough beast birthed the man that you can’t shake off. Tender, fragile, easily ruined things when removed from the body, those organs and muscle and viscera, when stewed, filleted, served poached, sous vide,*

dauphinois, cured, raw. Can't put them back, can't waste it. He didn't want it then, but he'll make ***everyone*** *have it now.*)

He drinks tonic water with lemon that Hannibal brings him with the midday prednisone, and wishes it were a proper drink. Hannibal doesn't talk much, fussing with small details, filled with his own distant anxiousness, holding a proverbial firework in his hand as well.

"Something I wished to share," Hannibal says.

Will just watches.

Hannibal's glorious revealing is anti-climatic: stew, with toasted sourdough rye slices on the side. It's a very attractive stew, for all that it *is* stew. Bright red and orange from the tomatoes and paprika, smelling strongly of lardons, capers, dill, and sour cream. The red meat from the brine is peaking out from between potatoes and floating oil from generous pats of yellow churned butter.

"Solyanka," says Hannibal. "A briny meat stew dish from Russia, and other parts of the Eastern Bloc." He pauses when Will doesn't give him much of a reaction. "I didn't care much for it growing up as a child or an adolescent, very much a token symbol of the Soviet occupation and the caretakers at the orphanage I was assigned to, but when I found my voice and my appetite again, it was amongst the first foods I can remember properly tasting."

Will turns the dish. He does it again.

He sees an adolescent boy becoming a man, some linen-shirted, skinny creature that has sat silently in his room like it's a kennel, and has decided how to feel for the first time after a trauma. He doesn't know the whole story, but he's gathered enough to understand it's significant. But Hannibal is still holding back the actual story, and that makes him give a little 'hah' of exasperation, contemplating the sheen of yellow oil spots in the broth.

(*A return to forensics - moist, anaerobic conditions favor the formation of adipocere but its appearance is not restricted to immersed remains. Any grave or terrestrial environment where adequate moisture is present can result in the formation of adipocere. In surface depositions, adipocere formation can occur in* -)

Will shakes his head.

“A little heavy handed, your soup, don’t you think?” he replies, an old echo.

Hannibal smiles in recognition. “No more than your singular whale, I suppose. Looking for some strangeness, Will?”

“Isn’t this strange?” he replies. “Should this be as transformative for me as it was for you? Another threshold to cross in the dozens we’ve crossed since you came here?” Will’s mouth twists, spinning his bent fork between his fingers. They don’t tremble - not from illness, not from nervousness. He is firmly here.

Hannibal must see that. There’s something contented in his falcon-bright eyes.

“I am telling you that it is not beef,” says Hannibal, looking across the counter with the intense scrutiny of one watching a starfall, or a disaster in slow motion. “It is, however, something that you’ve brought me. I have been advised on pain of death or pain of your absence to allow you to decide how you feel about that.” He is still, breath held somewhere in the waistcoat armored shell of his chest.

Hannibal is so secure in most things that he does, that Will finds himself somewhat in awe of the hesitation now, the seemingly innocuous history giving voice to what is actually sitting in front of Will. Vulnerable.

Will stares, unblinking at him.

“Tell me something else, Hannibal,” he says over the steaming of the bowl. “An accessory to this story. Why did you lose your voice and your appetite?”

Hannibal, statuesque, looks like he might not. They watch each other in stillness, ignoring how Buster walks back and forth between the kitchen and the bar side, nails going a *tap-tap-tap* , begging for scraps. Will thinks they should turn off the stove burners if they’re going to do this Mexican standoff bullshit. It wouldn’t do to ignore something that potentially destructive.

Hannibal’s mouth twists. “I was fed something I couldn’t stomach,” he rasps.

“And I’m supposed to stomach it now?” parries Will, pressing his advantage.

For the scantest second, Hannibal’s face is all distressed furrows before going blank and alien. “There is nothing about this man that is remotely comparable.”

(*And there it is, there’s the beginning verse of the sad story. Somewhere in the brush, there’s that thing that damaged him. There’s that thing that proves he’s alterable after all, human despite every tailored movement.*)

Will looks down, soup spoon in hand. It’s one of the few he’s been able to find in the loose metal bin down at the second-hand store. It’s one of the unbent ones. Across from him, Hannibal’s own bowl has one nicked at the handle in spots, dropped down into the garbage disposal somewhere in its life before them. Will guesses that’s as close as the man can get to putting the best foot forward outside his own controlled domain.

He takes a bite. It’s sour and salty, not like anything he’s had before. It must irritate Hannibal, having to make a provincial recipe to cover the fact that Ferris sat stale, Ferris sat sour in the tiny useless refrigerator that Daisy has on board that is distinctly not equipped for haute cuisine. That he took the risk at all to fit it in a space designed for beer cans and small TV dinners is a tragedy unto itself.

Another spoonful follows. And another, and another.

Hannibal, across from him, tries to ease the held breath out of himself without being a distraction. Will takes satisfaction in how it shakes, how he hides his hand in the grey dishcloth that Will never got around to tossing out. The top of his fists are an array of pulsing veins, each of which Will can pull out of place with a hateful word if it pleases him to do it.

They clean up dinner together, because Will doesn't have a big enough dishwasher to address the massive enameled stock pot that Hannibal has cooked his emotional hurdle in, kitchen renovation or not, and it's the correct thing to do. He cooks, and Will cleans. It's more domestic than either of them deserves, but Will is beginning to think he can't deserve much of anything, so he might as well just take it.

Will expects to feel some kind of disappointment with himself, finishing his bowl of the solyanka like it's the last food on earth, and that Hannibal can misconstrue his leaving anything behind. Everything's always *latent intent* and *subconscious desires* , and Will for once just wants to send an unequivocally clear message that isn't going to come up in a later conversation like he's written a book of the New Testament that's open to interpretation. The cannibalism has never been the core of Will's problems with Hannibal, not by a long shot. This is a more he can safely cross with only a flicker of doubt - it's the honesty of the explanation that he wants.

(*God puts creatures on the earth for Man, and Man finds ways to make other men into creatures for Him. They're all a sad origin story, a permutation of the same genesis. The spirit has fled - the flesh is merely carbon.*)

He's full, a touch more so than he's inclined to be, and offhandedly wondering at the nutritional value of humans in comparison to beef or lamb. Is he at risk for second-hand disease? Does it do better or worse when stored in less than ideal environments between the time or death, harvest, and eating? How much of it could have possibly fit into the tiny hotel bar-sized refrigerator that Daisy had full of frozen bait and a couple of ice cream bars Will stuck in there for the summer months and forgotten? Should he expect more? Should he bother to ask?

Hannibal just takes the dishes as one takes alms plates in the church, and says nothing. He's very solemn, working washcloths and scouring pads over the dishes, hiding temporarily in ritual of his own.

(*You did that to him. He allowed it, but you did it all the same.*)

When everything is in its rightful place, they pour glasses of Remy Martin (*yours small to account for your new list of medication, but it's a special occasion you reason)* , sit on the porch, and talk about if they need an awning for the rain. They sit in the misting drizzle anyway, chairs pulled close, a wool blanket from the collection spread over Will.

He's coaxed into the spare bedroom, where the bed has been made up in chenille pillows, a soft downy comforter, Hannibal's favorite of the quilted coverlets at the foot, and there's nothing to distract from the two of them. Hannibal may have bought a bed frame to make Beau's visit less troublesome and more comfortable, but otherwise it is austere as a monastery with the cheerful green, white, and blue of the pinwheel design standing out like a sore thumb. Nothing suggests his father was even here - nothing about it reads as anything but a small refuge that looks to the east over the tops of houses and into the brick warehouses and businesses there.

This is where they worship for a moment. This is where it's calm and safe and Hannibal can appreciate Will for the mess of fleeting fixations, scar tissue and neuroses that he is, and Will can appreciate Hannibal for not flinching away from that. There's a lot Will can flinch away from in Hannibal's demeanor, not the least of which how he disguises his own neuroses and trauma like Will would tear a strip of flesh from him if he left it uncovered, but Will's so overexposed to it at this point that it feels like a waste of time to obsess over it right now. (*That's for rides to work, a night alone, drinking bad whiskey and nursing your bad temper. That's not going anywhere.*)

They've not been as hurried as the first time they have sex, where every moment of careful-handed affection is threatened by reality coming back and taking over. Reality is established here. Everyone's a monster to varying levels. Will is a different person. Hannibal is too, for all that Will still holds him like a matchstick almost burnt to the bottom of the wood at times.

He's being memorized against the starbursts of the quilt. Hannibal is being unraveled against the starkness of the century old ceiling, stripped of his camouflage for once. They sit up and tangle into each other's lap before either peaks, and ride the wave of the other's pleasure like they're on the boat again, river mouth near and widening. They are silent, breathing wetly into each other's mouths where they can vanish for an instant. It's not a kiss as much as being lungs, their closeness a trachea between them to share.

It's cold in the house, as evening deepens into night, and the low clouds from the sea start obscuring the lights on the streets. They lay cradled up into the other, Will facing Hannibal instead of away this time.

"I guess you want to say something pretentious," Will mouths into the skin of Hannibal's shoulder, looking through the window over it, where if he looks down he knows the hydrangea and holly are rising around a wooden plank path to the back of the hill and out onto the next street up. The white painted exterior of the John Jacob Astor Building is a pillar of white, cornices and spires lit as a castle. "That this is all you wanted, all that you had been showing me seen in full."

"I would say that, but now that you have, I'll have to change my statement," Hannibal drawls, hand warm and wide on Will's side, just beneath the ribs. "Very gauche to be seen in the same outfit as each other. One might think we're mutually exclusive were they to hear."

"Do you think there's someone else that knows as much about you as me and still would have you?" Will asks, more sharp than he intends, but sour at the thought that Hannibal considers them anything but. (*You can examine that later.*) "Unless you've got more you're hiding," Will adds. "Then I proclaim the right to re-evaluate. Pending the result, maybe we can find another remote island location for a Battle Royale, and I can test out the sealant Daddy put in the boat couch storage space for liquid permeability."

Hannibal doesn't laugh as much as he sighs out his amusement, running fingers through Will's hair, never one to leave a hair snarl unpicked. "No," he says. "It's remarkable that you exist. That you came to be in my sphere of existence."

"You live a pretty charmed life," Will comments.

Next to him, humidly breathing slowly into the sweaty hair at Will's temples, Hannibal shakes his head after a pause. "Simply an improbable one," he says, and brushes his lips against Will's cheek in a downward slide.

"But there is one more thing," Hannibal sighs, and kisses the joints of Will's fingers like there's nothing he'd like so much as to hold them between his teeth and skin the knuckles with the sharpness of incisors, canines, and molars.

Abigail Hobbs is on the phone, and Will Graham is both furious and profoundly relieved.

She is missing an ear, as well as close to a year of a standard adolescent life, and probably will do better on a GED evaluation than the average high schooler because she has been privately educated by a polymath in Calculus and the French language, but when was her life ever normal? She's gotten very good at making gnocchi, jams, and macarons, all things she would eat everyday if Hannibal would let her. She likes watching YouTube videos about falconry. She has an anonymous Instagram account where she takes photos of the coast line and the bones she finds on the beaches. She's very sorry for lying. She didn't know what else she was supposed to do.

(*You don't know either. You're between throwing Hannibal off the balcony again, and kissing his proverbial signet ring if he had one,* le roi pervers *, a sick ruler in your kingdom.*)

"Are you ok?" She asks, tinny and hesitant over the phone. The metal from the phone case is warm, a long distance call made hot by cell signal and the sweating of Will's hands.

"About as ok as you, I'd imagine."

"More ok than me," says Abigail after a moment, not self-pitying, but blunt. "He actually likes *you* ," she adds, like it explains everything. It does. He can't imagine how much more terrible this all would have been if Hannibal didn't. He can't even understand the thought behind keeping Abigail alive this long were it not for the fact that Hannibal desperately wants to gift her to him, like somebody can be gifted to another like a wishlist item. *Gee, I'd really*

like a new set of anti-slip fishing gloves, a gift card to Amazon, and the teenager that you had me convinced for awhile I had eaten, he would say, written out on the ugly highlighter pink notecards that he keeps in the drunk drawer as a flashy way to remember errands, appointments, and seemingly inconsequential slips of the tongue that Hannibal makes that he needs to write down and think about.

(*You sometimes can't believe you can overlook it. You get what you ask for, you guess.*)

Will, despite Hannibal's assurances that Abigail is both self-sufficient and very well taken care of, is incensed for the greater part of a week about what he's supposed to do with this information and what that means for Hannibal and himself.

There's the very real fact that he doesn't know if he gets to claim some sort of moral high ground here, at least in regards to Abigail himself. He's not been a good role model. He's personally made her fear for her life on at least two occasions, one by her father's hand, and another by his. (*Hannibal, sneaking in behind you, makes her fear for her life, only to find the thing that she's actually more afraid of - a fear of not ever escaping, always a piece of a greater whole,* not a person.)

When asked, Abigail certainly doesn't want to live with Will either. Held captive for her formative years by merit of being born to the wrong emotionally compromised man, only to then be held captive for the benefit of another one. The mind boggles with Hannibal's leaps of logic in what constitutes reasonable gift-giving. "I would give you anything," he says when Will gets off the phone with Abigail, and Will knows it to be half-true - someday Hannibal will have to prove it properly, not half-measures, no sneaking out, secrets, impermeability. He's peeked at the details that make his mold, but Will looks forward to learning the entirety of it. If this is to last, he must.

"Can you keep it to more reasonable things like several thousand dollars worth of kitchen appliances?" Will says in reply. "My head is spinning with what you value and what you don't."

"Of course, Will," he says. "Only furnishings that I've been given explicit permission to place in the house, unpleasant processed cheese, and to walk the dogs on weekdays if I'm not

otherwise occupied."

"Anything else you need to drop on my head or are we really good to go?" The phone is hot in Will's hand. Somewhere, on the coast of Maryland, Abigail is going to bed. That's...that's something.

Hannibal wraps around Will like he would swallow him like a python. "No, dear heart," he rasps, and Will thinks today that's true.

Eventually, over coffee, as they often do, Will finds his voice, and asks what's next. They are bent over mugs of something Columbian and acidic, and Will is told he should get notes of caramel, vanilla, and stonefruit. It's Sunday, and he has to go back to work tomorrow, and it would be better if he knows what he's going to get frustrated by in advance - he might just drive if he's going to have to live in existential dread through the whole boat trip to the shop.

"I didn't really ever envision living with Abigail," he says, turning the handle towards himself, watching the crema atop the coffee cling to the inside. "I didn't really envision living with anyone. Even you. Especially you."

Technically, Will is putting the cart before the horse. They've not explicitly discussed it, the idea of Hannibal moving in, but Will thinks that's the natural progression, right? That's what's *done* . Realistically however, the white project house is too small for Hannibal, nevermind a teenager. It's not an issue of grandeur, kill rooms, kitchens, or any other upper-class frivolity that he can throw at the humble century old home close to downtown. It's logistics. It's having somewhere to to runaway when one or the other is chafing at the stability of their symbiosis.

Will doesn't want Hannibal to take over what little space belongs to him. More to the point, Will doesn't want to share a single bathroom forever any more than Hannibal does. He thinks Abigail would probably die inside at the idea of sharing with two adult men. He does a little bit for her on her behalf.

Hannibal, cracking eggs into a skillet, doesn't miss a beat. "You don't have to," he says. "I rather think she won't want to if asked. She's of an age to go to college and start forging her own path, and Astoria is very dull for a young person already familiar with small town rural upbringings. Perhaps Seattle, or somewhere further." He whisks the contents of the pan, focused. "If you're concerned about her financial stability, you can put the thought away. She has a trust of her own at this point."

"Is it really so simple for you?" Will says, somewhat aghast. "Catch and release, tag sign being her missing ear?"

"Wild things shouldn't be captive unless it's to heal where they won't on their own."

Will drinks from his mug, eying Hannibal over the chipped rim and feeling his teeth click. He wants to bite the porcelain, something, anything really. "What would you consider me then?"

"An animal that has escaped gross mismanagement and found a new range to live in," Hannibal replies, looking up briefly at Will. "Mismanagement by my hand, as well as at the behest of your career and colleagues. You healed fine in the woods without any of us, haven't you?"

(*You healed some on the road. You healed some when you let go of the old Will Graham and let the new one set up shop. You healed when you let yourself be angry. You healed when you let yourself be vulnerable. Some plants survive thousands of years by cloning themselves and grafting that into their being - how many Will Grahams will you be in this lifetime?*)

Will nods, and takes another sip.

"You said you wanted to stay, and so you shall. As will I, if that is not an overstep." Hannibal stops for a moment, considering the pan in his hand, and a container of sour cream to his side. Creme Fraiche, apparently, is hard to find last minute at the local chair grocer. He begins delicately rolling the cooking egg with a spatula.

He continues. "You've invested so much in this house, it seems a shame to not finish it. Besides, it suits you. It's yours," Hannibal adds, head turned, contemplative. "I think it best

to continue to give you free range. Our peace is brokered on...shall we say space to exist separately from time to time."

Will gives him a half-smile. "Can't miss what's never far away?"

"You are never very far in my thoughts," Hannibal muses, adding the sour cream to the egg mixture, "but it does seem you don't have much of an interest in listening to Brahms while making challah bread, and that maybe you would be happier if I did that anywhere but your house."

"That's true," Will shrugs, watching the skillet contents go from yellow to creamy white. " The kitchen's not nearly big enough for all of your breadmaking bullshit. The music is just ambient noise by comparison."

Hannibal, never one to do more than give an off-colored look to Will, simply keeps stirring. "That, and one would hate to leave a perfectly good project behind. Think of how little the next person will think of the piles of books as a Bohemian alternative to real furniture, or that your labors to repair the deck are up to modern American size standards. Where would they ever put the beer cooler?"

"Is your argument for us not leaving really that my home renovation efforts won't be properly appreciated?"

"I'm sure you found it therapeutic, so it will forever have some value, but I was thinking more so that if you don't finish it, a developer may purchase the property and have other designs for the parcel beyond the house's worth."

"To what, put up condos for yuppies from the city or make an exclusive gated community garden?" asks Will, pacing around the counter island to refill the mug. "I can see the tragedy in that I guess."

"To bulldoze your basement that we both know is the final resting place of our dearly missed Miss Lounds," says Hannibal, as cheery as a man being informed of a free trip to Disneyland.

“You don’t know that for sure,” Will says, frowning.

Hannibal seems to find the attempt to deflect a passing amusement at best. “Will, I may not have a forensic analysis background, but I am hardly an idiot.”

“No, you just hear ‘I am asking you please don’t do this specific thing’ and immediately think ‘I will do that thing as soon as feasible, but *secretly* ’.” Will shrugs, and wanders into the living room, mug in hand. He needs to walk off some of his irritation at Hannibal’s certainty. “There’s nothing to say she was ever in my house or that she knew I was here.”

“By your design, I am sure.”

“Then what makes you so certain?”

“The way you stare at the freshly poured concrete when you’re thinking of things that trouble you is so obvious that it’s borderline trite,” Hannibal explains, chopping bright green chives for the eggs. “I’m sure she’d be very gratified by it. You should pour a beer out for her,” he muses.

“Besides,” he soldiers on, stirring still, eggs getting fluffy. “If you hadn’t already bought a house to renovate, and there had been any evidence of what brought Freddie to Astoria, we would be having a pleasant chat from the cage in Baltimore State again instead of in your kitchen.” Will tries tossing a couch pillow at him, and Hannibal stops it, though Will thinks he spills some of his coffee in the process. If there is a god, the eggs will burn while he’s distracted. “A sophomoric effort, but I guess we can’t always myopically shoot huntsmen in their homes. You do seem to have something of a pattern with the hunting community though - something for us to ponder.”

Will slurps his remaining coffee loudly, just to see Hannibal cringe. Finally, when breakfast is plated and resolutely unmarred despite his best efforts, he laughs at the absurdity of the entire conversation.

Hannibal's solution to the space issue is to just buy another house. He's tired of renting, even if it is convenient.

(*Which is pretty indicative of how he treats most things that aren't you, isn't it? Something for you to work on.*)

"Do I look like the help or something?" Will asks, when Hannibal takes out his tablet, considering the older houses of Astoria and neighboring Seaside that use cute terms like "well loved" or "charming" to signal to Will that there are Problems With Them, even if they are very darling and Victorian. Maybe that's fair - maybe Hannibal as a buyer can come with a similar disclaimer. ' *Charming, quaint features. Features a mixture of strangely mixed prints, aphorisms, and an unfortunate tendency towards chaos. Will pay in cash, please don't fuck around with counter offers. Significant other asks that you allow as few food puns in a half-hour interview as possible - contemplating suicide if he ever hears one again.'*

Will watches him favorite property listings with a sour face, seeing Hannibal click little red heart icons with a sort of fever-dream bewilderment. It's so kitschy - he doesn't think Hannibal would use an emoji on his phone if it was the last thing between him and prison, but Zillow has somehow managed it. "I haven't even finished this house, and it's the size of a postage stamp next to these."

"Have you contemplated the possibility that I can hire a contractor and leave you to your shanty, destined to forever be unbothered by my own house?"

"Do you ever actually listen to yourself talk?" Will asks. Hannibal changes the tablet browser tabs to the news, and doesn't engage any further, sighing as someone beleaguered. Next to him, Buster tries to knock the tablet from his hand with an insistent nose.

After that, Hannibal does his home shopping unattended. Will is glad to avoid getting enmeshed. Hannibal doesn't want a total disaster the way that Will did. He's expecting something new, shiny, and difficult to maintain. A minimum of three German sounding brands of fixtures, maybe some antique bathtub that Napoleon himself was christened in, and of course a brick oven. He makes jabs about these things, and Hannibal himself shoots back with promises of a bog in the backyard for ritual sacrifice and at least one primitive outdoor whetstone that faces Orion's sword on a star chart for a couple months out of the year. (*"Goodness Will," he says reading emails lazily from the couch, "one can't have a proper*

home without some mystery, don't you think? We're not all blessed with open pits in our basements at the time of purchase. ")

When Hannibal finally decides on something and deigns to take Will on his escrow closing day, Will would like to say he's surprised by it, but in several ways he's not.

It's a white farmhouse, mid 1920s and very lovingly updated on the interior with panoramic windows that overlook the harbor and Columbia River. It sits perched on the same hill as the Astoria Column, not so close to Will's house as to be considered 'in the neighborhood', but not so far as to be inconvenient. The kitchen is, as expected, massive and bright. The surrounding lawn and garden is more than he can imagine either one of them having the patience to mess with, and there's an actual greenhouse. (*"Clearly you're living out some sort of Edwardian gentleman's fantasy," you joke, feeling awkward on the manicured grass and watching a boat on the water from a distance. "Oh no, definitely an early modern horror," he replies, all good humor. "There's a considerable attic to consider."*)

Will can't really find much fault in it. It's a nice old house with some nice new things in it, more of a concession to his taste than Hannibal's.

"I'm still keeping my house," he says a bit defensively, hands in his pocket out on the lawn. Next to him in his black pea coat and black and white scarf, Hannibal nods.

"It's good to have somewhere to go other than a stream," Hannibal says, black gloved hands going to Will's arms. "I hope it's to the porch, where we can watch the maple tree and the bridge lights come on."

(*You're glad you don't have to admit to going to him these days for that occasional sense of peace. Your revenge is that you think it's the same for him, and he never expected it.*)

Beau checks on him once after starting back up at work and taking Daisy out on another cruise on the harbor. He mostly does it because Will texts him first in an attempt to ground himself in a groundless environment. It is February. It has been a hell of a year.

It has a very surreal feeling, pulling away from the docks and passing under the bridge. There's no Hannibal, who has not been invited back on board since the events following Ferris. This is preferable - this is a place he's not supposed to be without permission. The commute gets to maintain a sacred solemnity. The gulls are deeply offended that he's not feeding them as much. There's still the crushing feeling of something bad about to happen, but Will, three weeks out from changing from a furious medical regimen to none at all, knows intellectually he's having a stress reaction. Old fashioned PTSD, Hannibal had called it a foggy past. Will tries not to think about it too often.

Rides pretty smooth , he texts. ***Sure you only did the inside?***

Beau, clearly bored or at home, hardly takes any time to respond at all, like he's only been waiting for the chance. It touches Will in a way he didn't think it would.

What kind of means do you think I have, boy? You pay my rent half the year.

Will smiles, and takes a bad photo with the phone camera of a cormorant that has come to rest on the prow of his boat, and the scattering of little black and white feathered bodies in the water as they glide by. It's refreshing to know they don't really care if he is jittery. They just want to know where the free food has gone. He'd feel bad for it, but Will occasionally reminds himself they don't need it, not really. They're designed to fish. It's a disservice to take that from them.

Been a while since I saw my birds. Haven't been on the water, just in the car. How's your egret?

On the porch where he always is, says Beau. A grainy picture taken with his flip phone follows. It's small, awful resolution, but sure enough in the mish-mash of green leaves and shrubs, he can see the suggestion of its white body sitting in the middle distance. Beau's named it Cassidy. Evinrude takes every opportunity to bark at it when he can. ***Slim pickings for him around Christmas, but he's here alright. I'll find him some baitfish tonight.***

Familiar comforts of nature, meet man. Man, meet the re-establishment of routine, mundanity, the restoration of order for the time being.

Will pockets his phone, not really smiling, but calmer.

It's really fascinating what changes and what stays the same. Docking for a day's work, Frank gives him a once over with his eyes, one for the boat, and then one for the dock. (*When you first appear white faced and weak on a Monday in January, he does even less than this, scowling severely and trying to send you home to sleep. You hold ground, and he claps you on the shoulder and tells you he's got a messy job to get you used to being dirty again. You laugh. You know better.*) He compliments Will on not crashing it for the first time on the water in over a month. Good to see him on Daisy instead of that ugly Volvo of his. Scow offers no welcome, and jumps from the dock to the deck of Daisy like he belongs there.

Also unalterered - docking again at home, with that big stupid yellow umbrella like a hazard sign in Hannibal's hand. He should really come with reflective tape and a flashing light just to double down on the image. But Hannibal has been as mild and easygoing as a summer day, preoccupied with his new house which is coming together in an absolute crawl. "No reason to rush it," he says. "We may be here in a while. It should have its own strength of character. Farmhouses shouldn't look like urban townhomes, yes?"

Will can't say he observes the dark clouding of Hannibal's face when out and about. He has either learned to hide it better, or he's having an exceptionally polite Winter. Maybe killing someone scratches the itch for a long time. Maybe the Chesapeake Ripper really is able to enjoy a rural life, perfecting how to laminate butter, making small talk with the coffee shop baristas, looking into industrial ovens for baking.

Whatever the case, Hannibal seems disinterested in much other than spending time with Will and small pursuits on the side. Maybe he'll rent a kitchen space downtown - he'd be killer at running a pastry shop, Will jokes, and potentially seeds the ground for its future. He's not foolish enough to think that it will be enough of a challenge forever. He thinks about seven year itches, if it will be growing tired of each other that undoes the calm, or if Hannibal will sharpen his teeth again on someone. Maybe it'll be Will, an agent of circumstance. Will can accept that Hannibal is who he is, much as Hannibal seems to have accepted that Will doesn't have a compulsion to kill, only the followthrough when an opportunity arises.

(*You suspect you'll leave again someday and it will be Hannibal's fault, even if you aren't a good person yourself. You suspect Hannibal will come running after, because he's become acclimated to needing you, attracted to your moral lapses like it's an eclipse. Everything in*

nature likes to happen in cycles. You can burn it all down and rebuild, and there's still the shadow of you, unwavering, and him looking for it hidden in the dark corners.)

The two of them have green chili and cheese pot pies for dinner. It's nice with a lager from down the street. They sit on Hannibal's lawn under blankets and watch the oil tankers sit on the water, waiting for their opportunity to cross under the bridge and out to the Pacific. The dogs sniff around the grass and press their heads into the two of them until Will decides it's time to go to bed. He stays the night like a frequent houseguest, but not the same in that they both stare into the dark, carded as leaves fallen onto a forest floor.

(*The satisfaction of being together, and the fear of it ending, is enough to keep you both in check. Living moments, instead of watching them tick down.*)

The weekend starts with an early morning return to the Highway 26 water cistern in the Land Rover. The sun is barely up, and Will grumbles but accepts the proffered mug of coffee, same as it always is, but with a touch more cream and sugar than the norm. It rains the whole way, casting the backroads into shadows and fog. It's peaceful, Gustav Mahler turned low and streaming into the cabin of the car, and Will dozes between curves in the hill. The seats are warm. The dogs are milling around in the back, nosing at the back of Hannibal and Will's arms.

The short pillar of river rock and concrete appears after a bridge crossing, as unassuming as an electrical box, made weird and charming by its isolated location.

The tap, in shiny chrome and brass, sits before them in its mossy shell, wet with morning rain and perspiration. There's no line for the water today, at least not yet - just the quietude of a remote highway, where the cistern sits undisturbed. Hannibal, ever the better planner of the two of them, has no less than three giant water jugs at the ready to sit beneath it. Five star water isn't something to pass up. Hannibal can control the real estate he lives in, the pipes used to plumb it, and the kitchen that sits in its heart, but the water that comes out is an effect of nature, not design. His new house has a wonderfully large sink and private well, but the acidity of the water doesn't stand up to his standard of coffee preparation. Something about wanting the beans to shine, not the undoubtedly questionable port town aquifer.

(*“Quel dommage,” he says with the roll of his neck, as one says “the dog is dead” or “the crops will yield a poor harvest”. You, drinking from the sink in the bathroom because it’s practically identical to the kitchen water, mentally tell him to grow the fuck up.*)

“You know, most wealthy obsessive types would just order bottled water on a pallet or something,” Will says with a grumble, tired and not too happy to leave the warmth of the car. “For the cost of one stupid black stove, you could have about a thousand bottles of something fancy and Parisian.”

“The water in Paris is terrible for these sorts of things,” Hannibal replies, deliberately striding past the point, more fixated on the stream from the tap to his large water reservoirs than on Will. “Chloral, perfectly potable, but hardly something I’d improve my current circumstances with.”

Will rolls his eyes. “You don’t have ‘current circumstances’, you have an old well that needs irrigating at a farmhouse.”

“Two farmhouses, actually.”

“Two?”

Hannibal smiles, something amused and secretive. Will distrusts it. “I shall endeavor to tell you about it in the future.”

Will looks forward to hearing it. He’s sure something about it will make him angry, but he seems to be more into that than he thought.

They load their haul into the car, and toast over canteens of the fresh spring water as though they are two fingers of cognac. Will still thinks the water is flavorless, but it’s bright and cold, and orders of magnitude better than the average drinking fountain. He can’t speak to the coffee it will make, but he can speak to how much better it tastes when it’s not chasing a bad thought away. They are starting their day on firm ground, with more dog hair than Hannibal probably envisioned, and more settled than Will could even guess at.

Will watches the road snake away behind them, hidden in the freshness of green forest and ferns. The spruce trees rise up on either side, the tall embrace of a secret hiding rivers, lakes, and the shore from the rest of the land. They can stay sheltered here until they can’t.

Will thinks for now that’s ok.

Chapter End Notes

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And that's all she wrote, folks.

I'd like to thank everyone that took the time to comment, share, and enjoy the story. I hope you leave happy, and if not happy, then at least unburdened. (You're free!) I'll miss writing with this Hannibal and Will, but there's other works on the horizon, and it will be nice to explore different iterations of them.

This was definitely written for my personal benefit to explore familial trends and cyclical relationships from the lens of Will, but I'm so happy you all are here! The nicest compliment someone could give me is a comment or kudos - I know not everyone is a big talker, but I do get a kick out of that little "I was here" that they indicate.

If you'd like to follow along again, tempestandteacup has a very lovely podfic version of the story linked as a related work - it's been very helpful for me to remember where I started, and I hope it helps introduce people to Will and Astoria in a different light.

Be safe, stay well, and here's to some easy summer days that make all this madness worth it.

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] each according to its kind by orphan_account

each according to its kind [podfic] by celebisaur, iamnotbritish (celebisaur)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!